XOE
ACCIDENTAL ASHES
BROKEN BEASTS
I
II
III
SARA C. ROETHLE
THE XOE MEYERS SERIES
BOOKS 1-3

THE XOE MEYERS TRILOGY

BOOKS 1-3 OF THE XOE MEYERS SERIES

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Xoe

Book One

CHAPTER ONE

I stared up at the moon, partially obscured by ominous looking clouds. I brushed a loose flake of ash from my hair as I tried to forget the overwhelming, acrid stench of smoke that had nearly overcome my lungs. I shivered. At least I was still alive. I blearily thought back over the past week, knowing my life would never be the same again.

ANOTHER YEAR at Shelby Heights High School in not-so-sunny Shelby, Oregon . . . oh joy. Shelby isn't exactly a small town, but it's definitely not a city. I'm not much of a "people-person", so the size is one of the few things I like about Shelby. That, and the woods that surround it. Tall pine trees are never out of reach. I've always been outdoorsy. My dad took off shortly after I was conceived and my mom raised me on camping trips and hiking. My name's Alexondra Meyers, by the way. I know, it's pretty horrible. Mercifully, the few friends I have call me Xoe.

Back to the matter at hand . . . junior year. I am not a fan of high school, or the teenage experience in general. I don't consider myself antisocial, though most of my fellow students might argue that point. Really, I just don't like to waste my time with pretense. Why bother being nice to someone I secretly dislike? Why engage in small talk if nothing meaningful is accomplished? I'd rather have a few real friends than a bunch of fake ones.

I trudged toward the towering, gray brick monstrosity that was Shelby High, feeling morose. Where there wasn't sidewalk or asphalt, the ground was covered with lush, green grass. Shelby is always green and moist, which is nice, except for the mold and mildew that tend to grow if you're not careful. Once my mom got a new car windshield that wasn't sealed properly. Within weeks the insides of her windows had grown algae.

I forced my sneakered feet to continue forward, concentrating on the sound of my footfalls, one foot in front of the other. As I approached the dreaded double-doors, my best friend Lucy joined me. We usually walked to school together, but Lucy always arrived at school early on the first day. She liked to "prepare" her locker and map out all of her classes beforehand. She's a bit of an over achiever,

to put it mildly.

Lucy and I pushed through the double doors together. I held onto my door long enough for a girl with a mass of brown curls to grab it and keep it open for herself. See? Not antisocial. I glanced down at the top of Lucy's dark-haired head as we made our way down the hall.

Lucy and I are complete opposites when it comes to appearance. I'm a giant compared to her. Well, not really a giant, but her petite 5'1" frame makes my willowy 5'8" seem excessive. Her long, dark, glossy hair is in complete contrast to my shaggy, shoulder-length, white-blonde mop. Lucy's skin is deep olive all year round, whereas mine is pale, and at times, a little pasty, what my mom kindly refers to as *porcelain*. Did I say that I'm a little jealous of Lucy? If I didn't love her so much, I would probably hate her.

Lucy had chosen dark wash jeans with a pale blue button-up blouse for her first day attire. The tips of conservative brown shoes peeked out from the bottom of her jeans. Lucy's sense of style errs on the side of caution. Her pin-straight hair was parted down the middle to cascade nearly to her waist, framing her fine-boned, delicate face, void of make-up.

Lucy's almond-shaped brown eyes peered up into my large green ones, waiting for my whining to begin. She'd had to deal with my complaining on the first day of school every year since second grade. We'd become friends when my mom and I first moved to Shelby, as Lucy's family lives just down the street from us. Alone and friendless, I had gone exploring in the woods behind my house, against my mom's strict commands, and Lucy was doing the same. We both had a stubborn independent streak that constantly ordered us to disobey our parents. How could we not be friends?

I glanced out the windows at the other end of the hall as we moved to stand in front of Lucy's locker. To add to my first day misery, the sky above Shelby was an angry gray, promising rain. Black clouds roiled ominously in the distance. So what else was new? I hate the rain. I'm not like a girly-girl that's afraid to get my hair wet or anything, but I'm at my happiest when I'm outdoors, and it's not terribly pleasant to be outside when it's raining. So, despite my pallid appearance, I much prefer the sun. I took a deep breath of the ozone-scented air that flowed in every time the doors opened. Let the whining commence.

"It's not that bad," Lucy consoled, taking in my grimace. "We have three classes together and you have two more with Allison. That leaves only one class to trudge through without us."

Allison was another on my short list of friends, though I'd only known her since freshman year. Lucy and I had met her during our first lunch at Shelby High. Allison's family was new to Shelby, so she

didn't know anyone. Rather than taking a seat at one of the loner tables, she had marched right up to where Lucy and I sat, slammed her tray down, and began chatting away like she had known us for years. I was skeptical of Allison's blunt style of friendship at first, but she turned out to be genuine. Plus, she adds a little bit of girliness to our small group.

"A small consolation at best," I replied sullenly as I looked up at the numbers on the wall of lockers, wondering where mine would be that year.

Lucy hummed happily as she opened her locker and pulled out the book needed for her first class. Her eternally sunny attitude could be quite vexing at times. Though, if she were a pessimist like me, the complaining would never cease. Lucy's glass half full philosophy made my glass look empty, dirty, and cracked.

Turning to me to take in my dejected expression, Lucy frowned. "I'll see you in French."

I managed a small smile, despite my misery. "See you then."

We parted ways as the first bell rang, and ran toward our respective classes to the sound of clanging lockers and hurried *see you laters*. I still hadn't found my locker, but it would have to wait.

I trailed my fingertips across the aged walls as I walked, in no real hurry to get to class. Shelby High is old, and I mean *old.* I could feel the bumps of countless layers of peeling paint beneath my fingers. The newest layer of paint was a pale yellow that was trying hard to be cheery, but fell a little short. I went past a row of faded green lockers, then took a left into my classroom.

My first class of the day, which I had with Allison, was biology. I scowled as I entered the classroom. It was simply too early in the morning for science. The room boasted lab tables instead of desks, making the space feel even more small and cramped than normal classrooms. The buzzing of the fluorescent lights mixed with the din of murmured voices made me feel instantly claustrophobic. I searched across the tables, which were set up to seat two people, with a little sink and electrical outlets in the middle, until my eyes landed on Allison. She waved me over to the table she had reserved for us at the back of the room.

I liked sitting in the back of the class. I don't enjoy the feeling of people's eyes on the back of my head, and teachers usually tend to call on people in the front of the class, ignoring the back. It's not that I don't understand the questions, I just prefer not to answer them. Allison was more than willing to sit in the back of the class with me.

Lucy was a whole other story. I always tried to lure her to the back, the *Dark Side* as far as she was concerned. We ended up front and center every time, where she could be sure the teacher called on

her when she raised her hand to answer every question. But hey, she diverts the teacher's attention from me, so I can't really complain.

As I approached, Allison looked me up and down, ending with a look of distaste at my ratty old sneakers. "Xoe, we are going shopping this weekend, no arguments."

Smirking, I looked down at my dark blue, vintage *Doors* tee and holey jeans, then at her blue sundress with strappy dark brown sandals, artfully applied makeup, and perfectly styled, long, honey blonde hair. Unlike me, Allison embraces the blonde. She is the master of the hair flip. I've never felt like a "blonde", but I'm too pale to pull off much of anything else, so I just try to ignore it.

At 5'6" Allison almost reaches my height, though she has a few more curves than I do, perfectly accentuated by her dress. She was still staring at my outfit with a perfectly arched eyebrow raised. Maybe Allison had a point. *Maybe*.

"Sure Allison, whatever you say." I was keeping the sneakers no matter what clothes she tried to put me in. They were my tried and true favorites, perfectly broken in and shaped to my feet. They had started life a solid black, but had faded to what I considered a rather pleasant gray. Allison took one last look at me, pity in her blue eyes, then turned toward the front of the class.

A throat cleared, bringing my attention to where our teacher, Mrs. Sanders, was waiting. Mrs. Sanders taught both biology and microbiology at Shelby Heights. She was a short, dare I say dumpy kind of woman with a horribly monotonous voice. She stared at me in mock exasperation until I slumped dejectedly into my hard plastic chair.

Mrs. Sanders went on to drone for an hour about her syllabus and all that other nonsense, with occasional pauses to straighten her lumpy pink cardigan. I drew on the cover of my notebook and tried to ignore her. By the time class was near its end, my notebook was covered with a mish-mash of nonsensical doodles.

Impatient for the bell to ring, I shoved my books back into the green backpack I used every year, throwing my pencil in haphazardly on top. I watched the clock, counting away the final seconds of class.

Finally the bell rang, and it was off to my next two hours of torture: French and World History. Even though I'd be with Lucy, I knew time would creep by at an alarmingly slow rate. I'm horrible at French, the pronunciation is simply beyond me, and World History is, well, World History. When I entered my French class, Lucy was already sitting front and center. Her new navy blue backpack was sitting in the seat next to her, waiting for me to take its place. After what seemed like days of words I didn't understand, followed by a lengthy discussion on "the cradle of civilization", it was finally time

for lunch—my brief reprieve from the monotony.

The cafeteria is one of the few spacious areas in Shelby High. The brightly lit fluorescents are diffused by the copious amount of natural light that pours in from several large single-pane windows mounted in two of the walls. My little group always claimed the same table at the beginning of each year. It was in a corner, so we only had to deal with two other tables near us, rather than four. We were also stationed directly below one of the aforementioned windows. Said window looked out over the courtyard area of Shelby High, which is basically just a large square of grass with several picnic tables stationed in the center. On rare sunny days we would eat outside.

Occasionally other acquaintances would sit with us, but most of the time it was just us three, and that was the way we liked it. Well, *I* liked it at least. Allison and Lucy are slightly more social than I am.

Lucy and I waited at our usual table with our bagged lunches while Allison bought hers. Allison's willingness to eat school lunches made me seriously question her sanity. Let's just say they weren't always identifiable as food products. Her justification was that she didn't *do* lunchboxes.

Bored, I scanned the lunch line for Allison, but a boy staring in my direction caught my eye first. He stood watching me with an empty tray in his hands, reminding me of a robot or some other mindless automaton. His short, near-black hair was styled to perfection. His pale blue eyes, emphasized by a deep tan, stared intensely at me. His stood at around 6'3" with a hulking frame that strained against a plain gray tee-shirt, topped by a simple brown leather jacket.

As I observed him he continued to stare, pursing his full lips that I imagined would be stuck in a perpetual pout. Besides the lips, the rest of his face was the epitome of masculinity: high, sculpted cheek bones, defined jaw-line, and a strong nose.

His heavy gaze sent a chill up my spine. What a creep. His husky-like eyes left me to land on Lucy, who he stared at just as intensely. I looked away with a scowl to finish scanning the lunch line for Allison. She had already paid and was walking toward our table.

"Oh come on," Allison said as she approached and noticed my scowl, "your day could not have been that bad."

Turning my scowl into a grin, I taunted, "Don't worry Al, it'll get better. We have gym next."

Allison's mocking smile faded. She whipped her hair over her shoulder and sat down next to me as she placed her lunch tray on the table. "Gee, Xoe, thanks for reminding me, and don't call me Al."

Gym was the bane of Allison's existence, as was my habit of calling her Al. She wasn't into sports of any kind, though she would probably be pretty good at them if she actually tried. Contrary to her tastes as a

seemingly traditional girly girl, she was one of the toughest people I had ever met, and would probably kick butt at some of the more aggressive sports if she actually tried. She was definitely not a book to be judged by its cover.

Unlike Allison, I actually liked gym. With my height and a fair amount of coordination, I'm decent at sports, and gym doesn't require hours of boring teaching. I have trouble sitting still for too long.

Allison turned to Lucy. "So Xoe and I are going shopping this weekend. You in?"

Lucy turned a speculative eye to me. "Xoe? Shopping? My how the times have changed."

I pursed my lips into an exaggerated pout. "I need new socks."

Lucy laughed. "Ah, the truth comes out." Then turning back to Allison added, "I'll come. I need a new toothbrush."

Allison crossed her arms and glared back and forth between us. "You're both updating your wardrobes if it's the last thing I do. I feel less fashionable just sitting near you."

Lucy rolled her eyes at me as Allison changed the subject to how her day had been so far. As Allison prattled on, I looked over my shoulder to scan the cafeteria for the creepy staring guy. I spotted him almost immediately sitting with Max, a J.V. soccer player, and yep, still staring.

Noticing my distraction, Allison took a break from her monologue to turn and follow my gaze. "Who's the hunk?"

"That *creep* has been staring over here since we sat down," I grumbled.

Allison smirked. "He's hot, maybe you should go teach him some manners."

I raised an eyebrow at her comment. "I will never understand your taste in men. He looks like an overly-primped jerk."

Allison raised both of her eyebrows in surprise. "My Xoe, you sure are feeling judgy today. That's supposed to be my job." She rose from her seat and looked over at Creepy Guy.

Realizing her intent, I reached for her arm and tried to pull her back down. "No way Al," I chided. "Don't even think about it."

Ignoring my comment, Allison pulled her arm away from me. With a mischievous smile, she hustled away from our table, then waltzed right up to Creepy Guy. She sat down on the other side of his table, facing him and Max companionably.

I shook my head and turned back to Lucy. We exchanged similar looks of resignation.

I sighed loudly. "And so it begins."

Lucy began to reply, then quickly turned her gaze down to the tabletop. I turned partially around to see what had interrupted Lucy.

Allison was walking toward us, leading Creepy Guy by the hand. They came to stand at the head of our table.

Allison twined her arm through Creepy Guy's, which remained limp. "Girls, this is Dan. He's new here." Allison nodded in Lucy's direction. "That's Lucy," then nodded to me, "and that lovely example of radiant good cheer is Xoe."

Allison released Dan's arm and took a seat next to Lucy, leaving only one option for Dan. I had a moment to glare at Allison for her cruelty, then Dan sat next to me with a quizzical look, like he didn't quite know what I was. I quickly turned away and found my gaze wandering back to Max, who was now sitting alone, looking confused. He stood and walked straight out of the cafeteria like a sleepwalker. I stared for a moment at the now empty doorway, wondering what had gotten into Max to make him act so strangely.

When I turned back to our table, I noticed Dan's gaze had drifted to Lucy. The look he gave her was far different from the confused one he had given me. He looked at Lucy like she was a piece of meat, and he wasn't even trying to hide it.

I expected Lucy to be squirming under the pressure of Dan's gaze, but instead she offered him a coy smile. My mouth fell open in surprise. I'd never seen Lucy flirt before, and I couldn't believe she'd chosen that moment to start. Dan didn't really seem her type, though I didn't actually know what her type was. Lucy, like me, didn't date a lot.

Allison, on the other hand, I was used to. She flirted up dates on a regular basis, and had no problem talking to guys. She was born to flirt, and flirt she did.

Before I knew what had happened, Allison's flirting magic had involved Dan in our shopping plans for the weekend, which had been altered to movie plans . . . gre-at. I would have rather gone shopping, and that was saying a lot. Dan had not made a good first impression on me.

My own thoughts began to tune out the conversation as Allison continued to quiz Dan on where he was from and any other inane fact she could think of. I felt uncomfortable sitting next to Dan. Waves of creepiness emanated from him. Okay, so maybe "waves of creepiness" was a little dramatic, but there was something very strange about him. He made my skin crawl. He shifted so that his elbow brushed mine, and struggled not to rub the goose bumps that instantly erupted on my arms.

I scooted away and watched him have a seemingly normal conversation with Lucy and Allison, while I tried to pinpoint what had me on edge. Listening to him talk, he seemed perfectly normal, but his face shattered the illusion. His gaze never left Lucy, even when he was

answering one of Allison's questions. It was like he was trying to memorize every small detail of her face. It was downright unnerving.

The bell rang, startling me. I stood abruptly and gathered up my uneaten lunch, grateful for once that lunchtime was over. Ignoring Dan, I said bye to Lucy, then grabbed onto Allison, who was entering Dan's phone number into her cell. As soon as she finished, I hurried her away from our table, leaving Dan and Lucy behind. I could feel the electric pressure of Dan's eyes on us the entire way.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Allison swooned once we were out in the hall and clear from Dan's gaze.

"What?" I questioned, lost in thought.

"Dan! He's gorgeous, or weren't you at the same lunch table as me?"

Allison liked Creepy Guy? Was she blind? The way he looked at Lucy had been pretty hard to miss. "Are you kidding? He's a total weirdo. Did you see the way he watched Lucy? Why did you have to invite him this weekend?"

"Oh Xoe," Allison responded, "ever the pessimist. Just give him a chance. It'll be fun." She paused for a moment and squinted her eyes. "And yes, I noticed the staring, but it doesn't mean he likes Lucy. It could mean anything."

"I didn't mean it that way," I clarified. "It was eerie. He hardly blinked. He looked at her like his favorite possession."

Allison frowned as a girl trying to get to her locker bumped into her. "Maybe he was just nervous."

"That was *so* not nerves," I argued. "That was stalker potential."

"You're being paranoid, Xoe. He just didn't know how to act. It's his first day at a new school. I'm sure he's fine," Allison paused. "You don't have to come on Saturday if you don't want to."

I set my jaw stubbornly. "No, I'll be there."

I was coming all right. I'd be damned if that creep was going to cause me to stay home on a Saturday, even if I had to sit through an entire chick-flick. Plus, how else was I supposed to keep an eye on him? Now, if only the feeling of doom in my gut would agree with me.

We made our way to the gymnasium, then headed straight to the girl's locker room to change. The gym somehow seemed even older than the rest of the school. You could feel the years of tears and sweat that had gone into the place, giving it an almost electric buzz. The walls had received the same lovely paint treatment as the rest of the building, and the gloss on the hardwood floors had been all but worn away by the thousands of feet that passed before us.

Our school was small enough that our gym classes were co-ed. It had been an issue with some of the parents,as apparently it was taboo for boys and girls to see each other in gym clothes, but common sense

won out. I would never understand parents. The co-ed classes were fine by me. The more competition, the better.

I changed my clothes quickly, grateful that we were allowed to wear our own sweats. The uniforms the school supplied were reused each year and came in our school colors of yellow and green. Yuck. How yellow and green went with our school mascot, an eagle, was beyond me. I let my dingy gray tee shirt fall over my plain black sweats and tied my hair in as much of a ponytail as its length would allow. I turned to Allison as I sat to tie my *Nike* tennis shoes, to see her dressed in pink shorts and a fitted white t-shirt, with a look of grim determination on her face. To Allison, preparing for gym class was akin to preparing for battle. We walked back into the gym as Mr. "Call me Mitch" Walters was announcing that today was volleyball day. Most excellent.

Brian Fletcher was chosen as one of the team captains. Brian and I go way back. He's my next-door neighbor and has been since I moved to Shelby. I've been friends with him about as long as I have Lucy. Brian's smiling brown eyes landed on me as he chose me for his first teammate. I jogged up to stand beside him and ruffled his curly brown hair with my hand. Brian didn't only choose me because I'm his friend, I also kick butt at volleyball, and he's almost as competitive as I am. To say we like to win is a vast understatement.

Allison was usually chosen last for team sports. She tends to close her eyes and flinch any time a ball comes near her. When the choices were down to Allison and a small nerdy boy I didn't know, Brian finally put Allison on our team. She shuffled up to stand by me as Brian ran to the ball rack to grab a few volleyballs.

Play began and I was up to serve first. I hit the ball overhand, aiming right at the small nerdy boy. He ducked out of the way, not even trying to hit the ball. Point one for us. So maybe I played a little dirty. So what? My teammates never complained.

After we started to play, time went by in a flash, and we totally crushed the opposition. Soon we only had 10 minutes of class left, not enough to play another game, so "Mitch" told us just to get changed and hang out until the bell rang.

No one takes showers after gym class. It may seem kind of gross, but if you could see the rusty, grime-infested showers in the Shelby High locker rooms, you would no doubt understand. The consensus was that you would come out dirtier than when you went in.

Having changed back out of our gym clothes, Al and I went to stand near the door to talk to Brian. We had barely reached Brian when Cindy Miller swayed up to us. As gym was the bane of Allison's existence, so Cindy Miller was the bane of mine. Cindy was every guy's dream and my worst nightmare, rolled up into a slim brunette

package.

Completely ignoring Al and me, Cindy walked up to Brian. “Nice game,” she purred. “we should practice together sometime.” As she spoke, Cindy casually brushed imaginary lint off Brian’s shoulder.

Brian looked at me pleadingly, trapped. I tapped Cindy on the shoulder, turning her to me with a look of distaste in her large brown eyes.

“*What*?” She asked with as much snark as a single word could possibly possess, snarling her glossed lips.

“Oh, I thought you were asking Brian for some playing tips,” I replied sweetly. “I was going to tell you to keep your head down. It’s rather large and blocks your teammates’ view of the ball, though the same tip could apply to your butt as well.” I gave her my most innocent smile.

Catty, I know, but Cindy had it coming. Last year she spread a rumor that Allison was bulimic, and purposefully dumped a soda onto me during lunch. So *me-ow*. Cindy gave me a murderous look and walked away as Allison burst into laughter.

Brian put his arm around my shoulders companionably. “That’s why we love you, Xoe.”

The bell rang and Brian gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then practically skipped away to his locker like an excited puppy. He had English with me next. Now don’t get the wrong idea, Brian and I were strictly friends. We had more of a brother-sister relationship. People talk, as people tend to do, but we’d never crossed that friendship line. I said goodbye to Allison, then headed to class.

I reached my English class and snagged a seat near the back, though the very back row was already full, so I had to settle for the second to last row. I was patiently waiting for the “excitement” to begin when, lo and behold, Creepy Guy, I mean Dan, walked in. He walked right toward me, then took the open seat to my right. I froze, like a mouse trying not to draw the cat’s attention. He glanced at me, as if to say something. With my heart pounding in my ears, I ignored him, keeping my eyes toward the front of the class.

Brian came rushing in and took the seat on my other side, oblivious to my predicament. As class began, I noticed Dan sneaking more puzzled glances at me. Squinting his pale blue eyes, he would tilt his head slightly, almost like a dog. My wardrobe might have been a little out of style, but was it really that puzzling? Did I have something on my face? The weird looks were starting to get to me.

Brian passed me a note while the teacher’s back was turned. I opened it and read, “What’s with that guy?”

I gave Brian an exasperated look and shrugged, relieved that it wasn’t just in my head. I turned my eyes to the front of class and

prepared to wait out the rest of the torturous hour.

When the bell finally rang, Dan reached out as if to grab my arm, with a calculating look in his eyes. I quickly turned away from him to Brian, and practically dragged Brian out of class. The look in Dan's eyes as he'd reached for me had been completely alien, like he had dropped his already poor mask of normalcy. Whatever lurked behind those icy blue eyes wasn't something I knew how to deal with.

Brian and I stopped in the hall, safely away from the classroom, to discuss the creepiness of Dan. With a nervous look over my shoulder, I dragged Brian a little farther away from the classroom, just as Dan exited and walked past us. "Allison invited him to the movies with us this weekend," I whispered, making it clear by my tone that the movie date was a bad thing.

Brian frowned. "That does *not* seem like a good idea. I've got a bad feeling about him."

At least someone agreed with me. "You know how Allison is . . . "

Brian smiled ruefully. "Yeah, I guess you didn't have much choice. I could come with you, just in case."

"Really?" Maybe things were looking up. "We're going Saturday evening."

He cringed. "Oh. Sorry Xoe . . . football practice." He shrugged and bit his lip. "I could cancel . . . "

"No, no it's okay," I assured. "I'm sure we're just being paranoid."

Brian nodded slowly, still hesitating. He nodded again and stood up a little straighter, as if making up his mind. "C'mon, I'll walk you to class."

Brian and I walked in silence the short distance to my geometry class. He stopped me before I walked into the classroom. "If you change your mind and want me to come, just call."

I had begun to say thanks just as Allison whipped by us, grabbing my arm and dragging me into the classroom. I waved to Brian as he turned to go to his next class.

Allison and I snagged seats in the back just as the bell rang. She turned to me and opened her mouth as if to speak, but the teacher began her lecture, sealing any chance Allison had to talk. Assuming she was probably going to talk about Dan, I didn't really mind. Allison crossed her arms and slouched down in her chair, seeming more than a little sullen. I looked out the window to our green surroundings and daydreamed for the rest of class, glad that I was no longer in the same room as Dan.

After geometry, Allison had to rush to her yearbook committee meeting and I went to find Lucy. Lucy was already waiting outside the school entrance when I arrived, just like she always was. We started the short walk to our houses in silence, passing through the parking

lot in front of the school, then veering away from the road to cut through the woods. We could get home following the road, but taking the trail through the woods cut about ten minutes off our journey.

Before Allison got her car, she would insist on the longer route of paved road whenever she came home with us, as Allison isn't big on the woods. They get her shoes dirty.

Lucy and I walked along companionably, shaded by the pine trees that bordered either side of the partially grown-over trail. A narrow strip of deep brown soil was all that was left to show us the way, though we'd walked it so many times we didn't need the trail to lead us home. I looked up through the trees to find that the sky had actually cleared up some. The warm sunlight leaked down to hit my face as we walked. I smiled and took a deep breath of moist, mossy air, then looked back down at the ground just in time to notice and hop over a puddle of water on the trail.

I continued walking, paying more attention to where I was stepping, thinking that though it was pleasantly sunny, something felt slightly off. It then occurred to me that the woods were overly quiet. The usual ambiance of birdsong, and the scuffling of small creatures through the underbrush were completely absent. I stopped and scanned the area. Nothing moved. Lucy stopped a few feet ahead of me and looked back questioningly.

All of the tiny hairs on my body stood on end, as if my skin were charged with electricity. Lucy slowly turned to fully face me. She glanced around us, then noticing the eerie silence, her eyes widened. I nodded to the trail, signaling that we should continue walking. We started off again without a word, trying to step as lightly as possible. Instinct told me to stay as quiet as I could, like a rabbit trying to avoid a predator.

Suddenly a blue jay flew overhead, screeching out warning to all of the seemingly absent birds, then flew on away from us, leaving a weighted silence behind. My palms began to sweat. We walked for several minutes with only the sound of our footfalls and heavy breathing to let us know we hadn't gone deaf.

Lucy began darting nervous glances at me. I stopped again and gave her my full attention. She mouthed, "Should we run?"

I began to shake my head in reply, when suddenly there was a loud crack to the left and behind us, as if someone had stepped on a branch. We both froze, neither of us so much as breathing. Lucy kept her eyes on me, at a loss on what to do.

I scanned the woods around us, trying to spot the origin of the cracking sound, but the pine trees and other vegetation were too dense for us to see very far. All was still and silent again, but my instincts were screaming in my head for me to flee. I looked back to

Lucy, nodded, and we broke into a full-blown run.

CHAPTER TWO

We ran through the woods, the trees a blur in my peripheral vision. After a short time I had to slow my pace for Lucy's shorter legs to catch up. Adrenaline pounded in my head like a second heartbeat. Lucy pushed harder and began to pick up speed, but then tripped and went flying to land in a heap on the moist soil. I skidded to a halt and crouched to grip her upper arms, dragging her to her feet. She brushed herself off and we continued running down the trail until the vegetation became less dense. We were almost safe. We slowed to a trot as we reached our street, then stopped in front of Lucy's house, both of us panting from the effort.

Lucy took a moment to catch her breath, then said, "Okay, that was weird, you felt it too right? Like someone watching us the whole way . . . the same someone who stepped on that branch."

I nodded my head and looked behind us, searching for a sign of our anonymous stalker. "What do you think it was?"

A shaky laugh erupted from Lucy.

I whipped my head back around to regard her. "What could you possibly be laughing about?" I asked, exasperated.

"Never mind, we're being ridiculous, it was probably just a deer or something." Despite her laughter, she didn't sound very sure. She looked away from my skeptical glare and began examining her palm, which had been scraped when she fell.

I continued to stare at Lucy until she finally raised her eyes back up to meet mine. She flinched slightly at my stubborn look. "C'mon Xoe, do you really think that we were being followed?"

I crossed my arms. "Yes, yes I do."

Lucy sighed. "By what? No one's seen any bears or mountain lions this close to town in years."

It was my turn to look down. "Maybe it wasn't a bear."

Lucy laughed again. "Who would want to follow us, and for what reason?"

I shrugged and met Lucy's eyes again, not able to brush the situation off as easily as she was. "I don't know, but we *were* followed."

Lucy put her hands on her hips. "Okay, say we were, what do we

do about it now?"

I sighed. She had a point. "Nothing I guess." I managed a weak smile. "I'll see you tomorrow okay?"

With an uneasy nod and a wave goodbye, Lucy veered toward her house. I watched her go inside, then continued down the street.

My house wasn't far, and soon came into view. As I reached my door, I sensed movement in the woods to my right, but my eyes couldn't pick up anything out of the ordinary. That cracking sound we'd heard had *not* been a deer. A deer wasn't heavy enough to break a branch that large. I waited, pretending to examine the purple flowers that cascaded over the edges of the planter that rested to the side of my front door. Everything was still.

With a sigh, I unlocked my front door and entered my house, still feeling a little shaky. As soon as the door was shut, the tension in the middle of my back eased. I walked through the kitchen to the large dining room window and looked outside for . . . what? Feeling silly, I shook my head and went upstairs to my room.

Shutting the door behind me, I moved to the back left corner of my room that my queen size bed dominates. I sat on my forest green comforter and leaned against my mismatched yellow and blue pillows, feeling exhausted. I looked around my messy room, feeling numb, but also embarrassed for being so paranoid.

Like my mismatched bedding, there is no rhyme or reason to the decoration of my room. Besides my bed, the rest of the space is taken up by my desk, my clothes dresser, and my bookshelf. The empty wall space above my desk and dresser is consumed by posters from old horror movies. I'm a bit of a horror movie aficionado. I don't discriminate between old, new, hit movies, B movies, or anything in between.

My ancient, at least it seemed ancient to me, stereo system rested on the floor beside my desk. At any given time, my room is strewn with the cases of whatever CDs I'm obsessed with at the moment, plus a few books. On the other side of my desk is the door to my bathroom. That is one of the few positives about my room, my own private bathroom. The large picture window in the adjacent wall isn't bad either.

I reached down to where I had dropped my stuff and pulled my English book out of my backpack, then stood to set it on my desk. First day and we already had an assignment. It was just plain cruel. If I didn't do the homework now, I would procrastinate until the day it was due. My goal was to do a little better in school this year. The classes weren't exactly hard for me. It was more a lack of motivation that kept my grades down. There were just so many books that I wanted to read, and none of my school material made the cut.

I sat down at my desk, my mind still preoccupied, trying to come up with an explanation for the eerie experience in the woods. No matter how I tried to justify what had happened, I kept coming back to the same conclusion: someone or something had followed us, and he/she/it chased us when we ran. The thought briefly crossed my mind that predators will chase you if you run. It's instinct. They simply can't help themselves. I suppressed a shiver and stared at my English book for several minutes, then got up and went downstairs. Tomorrow, I'd do it tomorrow. Ri-ight.

My mom was getting home from work just as I reached the living room. She's a field biologist. I'm not sure exactly what she does, something to do with birds. I tried having her explain it to me once, but when she got to the part about collecting dead bird bodies to study, I decided I was okay with not really knowing what my mom does. Her job takes her out of town a lot, which can be good and bad. I miss her, but having free range of the house does *not* suck.

My mom noticed me and gave me a warm smile that reached her chocolate brown eyes. I get none of my looks from my mom. Her dark, wavy hair and tan skin are in sharp contrast to my blonde paleness. I probably look more like my dad, but I never knew him, so I have no proof.

My mom's hands were full with what looked like plastic bags of Chinese take-out. My stomach growled as the smell of greasy food hit me. We don't have the healthiest eating habits, not that I'm complaining. Our main dinners of choice are pizza and Chinese food. If we get bored we occasionally throw in some Indian or, gasp, have a home-cooked meal. On the rare occasion that we decided on home cooking, the task always fell to me. My mom and cooking apparatus of any kind just do not mix.

My mom took the bags to the rectangular, pale wood dining table, while I grabbed us each a glass of water. See, we're not *that* unhealthy, water is good for you. Plus there are usually vegetables in Chinese food. Don't judge us.

My mom pulled out a matching pale wood chair, smoothing the skirt of her burgundy cotton dress as she sat. I followed suit, then dug in the bags for the included wooden chopsticks, handing a set to my mom. We took the little cartons of food out of the bags and placed them between us on two woven yellow placemats. My mom watched me with curiosity in her dark eyes.

"How was your first day?" she asked casually.

"Eh," I replied, "same old, same old. I've got three classes with Allison, two with Lucy, and one with Brian, so that's good."

My mom smiled. "Any cute boys?"

Ugh. I sighed, "Must you always ask that question?"

My mom nodded enthusiastically. “Of course. It’s a mom’s duty.”

I ignored her question and focused on my food.

“Any interesting classes this year?” she asked, taking my silence for the dismissal that it was.

“C’mon mom, are there ever any interesting classes in high school?”

She laughed her usual, full-throated laugh. “It could happen.”

“When hell freezes over,” I replied with a smile. “How was your day?”

“Same old, same old,” she mimicked. “I may have to stay a few days in Washington next week.”

I nodded and turned my attention back to my food. My mom prodded me a few more times about boys as we ate, but I unfortunately had to leave her disappointed. Once we finished eating, I headed back upstairs to my room.

As I walked in, I glanced at my English book sitting forlornly on my desk. I thought about trying to do my homework again for roughly two seconds, then grabbed the worn novel off the top of my dresser. I spent the rest of the evening re-reading *Galapagos,* by Kurt Vonnegut, until I was tired enough to go to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

There was fire all around me. Everywhere I looked was a solid wall of flame, bright blue at the bottom fading into orange, then pale yellow. I should have been scared, or at least passing out from lack of oxygen, but I was somehow calm. I looked back at the wall of flame.

There were faces in the fire. Faces from my past and present, and some I didn't know. I saw my mom, Allison, and Lucy amongst them. The faces were all watching me, waiting to see what I would do. A large wolf appeared in the flames, its shaggy gray-black fur immune to the fire. He watched me with his head cocked.

I woke up drenched in sweat. I wiped my brow with the back of my hand as I recalled my dream. I'd had dreams of fire a lot in the past few months, some involving friends and family, and some where I was all alone. The wolf was new though. All of the dreams involved fire. The fire never burned me. I couldn't even feel the heat. I had no idea what they meant, or if they meant anything at all. The eerie part was that I always woke up with a fever that subsided after an hour or so.

I struggled out of the tangled mess I had made of my sheets and padded into my purple-themed bathroom, turning on the water in my marble tiled shower as soon as I entered so it would have time to heat up. Once the water began to steam, I added a little bit of cold to the mix, stripped off my still-damp t-shirt and boxers that I used as pajamas, and stepped in.

As the hot water washed over my face, I thought more about my recent slew of dreams. I couldn't understand being surrounded by fire, and not being afraid. I mean, I've never been particularly afraid of fire or anything, but I'm sure if I were surrounded by it in the waking world, I'd be more than a little scared.

My mom, who likes to interpret dreams, had quite a few theories, but none that really made sense to me. She told me that fire could symbolize change, life and death, re-growth, or a myriad of other things. It could be different for each person. I had no idea what fire was to me, but I knew there was more meaning to my dreams than simple interpretations could foretell. I've always had a strong sense of intuition. Something bad was coming. Hopefully our house wouldn't

burn down.

My train of thought had led me to forget whether or not I'd shampooed my hair yet, so I did it again, just in case. I'd been doing that a lot lately.

When I was done, I turned off the water and slid open the glass shower door. Steam seeped out into my small, but beloved, bathroom. I grabbed a fluffy purple towel from the wall rack and wrapped it around me, then moved to look into the round mirror above my sink, clearing a circle in the condensation with my palm. I wiped my moist hand on my towel and peered at my reflection.

I looked like I'd seen a ghost. My face was even paler than usual and I had dark circles under my bright green eyes. The row of big, round light bulbs above my mirror made the dark circles look severe. The dreams were not only weirding me out, they were interfering with me getting a good night's sleep . . . and causing me to run out of shampoo. Sighing, I ran a comb through my wet hair and left it as that. I dressed in jeans and a dark green t-shirt that emphasized my eyes, and went to school.

When I reached my Biology class, Allison didn't even bother to tell me her thoughts on my outfit of choice. She simply straightened her satiny burgundy tank-top that went with her designer jeans and dark-brown suede boots. It seemed Allison was beginning to view me as a lost cause. Okay by me.

Mrs. Sanders had decided that the second day of class was a perfect day for dissection. Earthworm guts in the morning. Yum. Ms. Sanders waddled from table to table, letting us choose our sickly gray earthworms with long tweezers from an industrial size jar. .

"Why Xoe? Why *worms*?" Allison whined.

"Look at it this way Al, it could be way, way worse. In Advanced Bio they have to dissect cats and baby pigs," I said, turning Allison a lovely shade of green.

Allison was basically the worst lab partner in existence. She refused to touch anything slimy, stinky, or otherwise, even with gloves. I tried not to breathe in the odor as I pinned the poor departed earthworm to the blue foam inside the metal dissection tray. I then poised my scalpel to cut along his underside, following the diagram in our Biology books. Some sort of fluid squirted toward Allison as I punctured the worm, causing her to jump out of her chair and emit a girly scream. I practically fell over laughing, as did those seated near us. I hadn't squirted her on purpose, total accident. Scout's honor.

No one seemed to have much success with the worms. By the time class was reaching its end, most of the little creatures had been annihilated into unrecognizable bits of goo. The bell rang before anyone had cleaned his or her tray, so we all had to rush to do it

before Ms. Sanders would let us leave. We were going be late for our next classes, with written excuses in hand. Things were looking up.

By the time lunch rolled around, I was still in a fairly good mood. That was, until Lucy and I walked together to the cafeteria to find that Dan was already at our table waiting for us. Lucy sat down right beside him, pretending she was doing nothing out of the ordinary. I considered for a moment sitting somewhere else, but then grudgingly sat down across from Dan and Lucy.

Dan scooted a little closer to Lucy as I sat, being horribly obvious. Lucy's pale green, lightweight sweater and khaki pants looked out of place against Dan's charcoal colored t-shirt and dark-wash jeans. Dan met my observant gaze almost territorially. My pulse sped up just a bit. What was with him?

Allison arrived with her lunch and sat down next to me, frowning at Dan and Lucy's closeness. I pulled my oh-so nutritious lunch, a granola bar, out of my backpack and started munching on it, maintaining eye contact with Dan defensively, trying to ignore the feeling of my hair standing on end. The granola felt like cardboard as it reached my stomach.

"Don't you have a lunch?" Dan asked Lucy, turning away from my glare.

"Oh, um, I forgot," Lucy answered.

Forgot? She never forgot. I had the sneaking suspicion that she simply didn't want to eat in front of Dan. I would never understand the way girls act around guys. Missing lunch just so he wouldn't see you eat? Sorry, but I wasn't missing lunch for anything short of Johnny Depp.

"Do you want me to get you something?" Dan pressed, looking down at Lucy like she was a rare, delicate flower.

Lucy's skin darkened with a blush. She looked down at the table. "Oh, no thanks, I'm good." After a moment of silence, she quickly added, "Thank you for the offer though."

"You're really not hungry?" I prodded, annoyed with Lucy's behavior.

"No," she replied, her skin somehow going even darker.

"I can't remember the last time I saw you skip lunch," I went on. "It just seems kind of weird." Okay, so I was being cruel, but Dan's presence had me in a bad mood.

Brian trotted up to our table to squeeze in between Allison and me, saving Lucy from further prodding. He was wearing his football jersey and jeans, even though the green and yellow jerseys looked terrible on just about everyone. He set his lunch tray on the table and smiled mockingly when Allison looked down her nose at him.

Dan watched Brian like a hawk, scooting even closer to Lucy. Brian

stared back at Dan, mouth screwed up in confusion, then his brow furrowed over his suddenly defensive glare. Uh oh, I could feel the testosterone rising. Dan and Brian continued to stare at each other. Dan was intimidating, and Brian, well, he tried. Something that sounded like a low growl trickled from Dan's throat. Brian blinked, the defensive look on his face slipping into one of confusion.

"Did you just growl at me?" Brian asked in disbelief.

Dan continued to stare. Brian frowned, but held his ground. What the heck was going on? I mean, it's not like masculinity contests are uncommon amongst teenage boys, but this was just plain odd. Lucy was practically cowering. Allison was looking back and forth between the two boys like they had just sprouted second heads.

"What is with you?" I asked Dan, exasperated.

He turned his icy glare to me, making me wish I hadn't spoken. Brian seemed relieved to have the attention off him.

Mustering up my courage, I raised my eyebrows. "Well?" I asked, a little more shakily than I would have liked.

Dan suddenly snapped out of it as a small smile crossed his face. Next he started laughing. "I totally had you guys going," he said, laughter tinting his words.

Brian laughed hesitantly and soon Allison and Lucy joined him, brushing off the awkward moment. I didn't get the joke.

The bell rang.

Brian slowly rose with his tray, eyes never leaving Dan. "I'll see you guys later."

Apparently Brian was unsure of the "joke" as well. I watched Brian walk to the trashcan and dump his mostly uneaten food. Dan stayed seated, practically pressed against Lucy, until Brian was out of sight. He then insisted on walking Lucy to class. She seemed to be deciding between being pleased or maybe just a little creeped out. They walked out, leaving Allison and me alone.

"What on earth was that about?" Allison asked.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "I told you he was a creep."

Allison's brows knit together in confusion. "But he *growled* at Brian, like a dog or something. Was he seriously just kidding around?"

"I don't know, but I don't get the joke. Maybe we should cancel on Saturday."

Allison sighed. "I don't know if Lucy will go for it. Besides, he really could have just been joking."

"He sure has a weird sense of humor," I replied with a scowl.

Allison gave me a weak, humoring smile and we headed for gym. The rest of the day went by as usual, but Lucy and I had Allison give us a ride home, just in case.

The next few days of the school-week were uneventful. Dan sat

with us at lunch, with no more shows of male dominance, joking or otherwise. He continued to stare at me during English, but never tried to speak to me alone again. When Friday finally came, the elation I usually felt at the weekend was tainted by the fact that Dan was still included in our Saturday plans.

Lucy and Allison had seemingly forgotten about his weird moment, or else they simply chose to ignore it. I, on the other hand, had not forgotten, and was dreading Saturday. In addition to the evidence I had suggesting that something was seriously wrong with Dan, I also just had an uneasy gut feeling about him. My intuition was still screaming that something bad was coming . . . or maybe it was already here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Allison had decided that the shopping couldn't wait until next weekend, so we were going Friday afternoon. Lucy and I waited outside my house for Allison to come pick us up. Not that we couldn't drive, we both had our licenses, but sadly, no cars. Allison's parents bought her car for her on her 16th birthday.

Lucy and I were sitting on the swinging redwood and wrought iron bench that dominates the left side of my front porch, when Allison's dark blue Nissan *Sentra* pulled into my driveway. I matched Lucy's resigned sigh with one of my own. Neither of us enjoys shopping, but Allison has a tendency to beat at your resistance until you finally just give in to whatever she wants.

"You ready for this?" I asked Lucy.

Lucy nodded her head with a look of determination. "As ready as I'll ever be."

I stood and straightened my jeans and lightweight navy sweater, then turned to wave goodbye to my mom, who I could see through the kitchen window. Lucy and I strode toward Allison's car to meet our fate. I stole the front seat, forcing Lucy to slide into the back as we were assaulted by some generic girly pop music blasting from Allison's car speakers. I immediately grabbed the volume knob and turned the music down to a bearable (or at least as bearable as girly pop can be) volume.

"Remind me why we're friends with you?" I asked Allison playfully.

"It's because I have a car," she replied with a smile. She glanced back still smiling to acknowledge Lucy, but her smile slipped a little as she noticed Lucy's sweater, which was practically the twin of mine. Allison looked back at me, then at Lucy again. "What are you, the *Bobbsey Twins*?"

I sighed. "It wasn't on purpose, don't judge, you're not exactly looking your usual self today."

Allison looked down at her plain white t-shirt and torn, faded jeans. She shrugged. "Laundry day."

I smiled and said jokingly, "I knew there must be some valid excuse."

“Of course,” Allison replied as she mimicked a royal bow with the top half of her body. She put the car in gear and began to maneuver out of my driveway. She glanced at me as we reached the road. “Did your mom give you any shopping money?”

“Yeah,” I replied, “she was so shocked that I was actually going back-to-school shopping that I didn’t even have to ask her, she just excitedly ran for her wallet.” I held up my mom’s gray and gold credit card as evidence.

“Lucy?” Allison asked, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Yep.” Lucy’s hand appeared between Allison and me, holding a fifty dollar bill.

Within a few minutes, we were driving past the Shelby cemetery. Cemeteries give me the creeps, especially the one in Shelby. Lucy and I visited it after Lucy’s grandma passed away. We had walked among the rows of graves, all the way to the back where the oldest tombstones loomed, some of them dating back to the early 1800’s. I could feel the age of the place, like the spirits of the long-dead corpses were surrounding me, trying to push me out. I know logically that ghosts don’t exist, but the sudden feeling of panic that scraped across my skin while I was among the dead begged to differ.

Once the cemetery was out of sight, I let out a breath I hadn’t known I’d been holding. I turned my attention back to the narrow road ahead of us. We soon approached what Shelby calls a “mall”. It was more of a hallway according to Allison.

We parked in the partially full lot and stepped out of the car to be met by a cool breeze. I wouldn't have minded hanging around outside for a bit, but I grudgingly followed Allison straight inside the mall to its fluorescent-lit corridor.

The mall was the stuff of nightmares. Salespeople called to us from little kiosks in the middle of the hallway, asking us what cell phone service we had or if we had ever heard of the *Dead Sea.* Groups of people from our high school were clustered together, laughing and ignoring the fact that they were totally clogging the sporadic flow of foot-traffic. Lucy and I followed Allison as she veered into one of the chaotic, brightly colored stores.

Allison got right to work, like a tiger on the prowl. Soon Lucy and I had piles of clothes draped over our arms. We trudged back to the fitting rooms before Allison could weigh us down with yet more clothing. The fitting room attendant was a petite woman, probably only about 5’1”, with bright red, curly hair. She showed me to my own little stall and hung all of my clothes on the little hooks inside.

Once I was away from Allison’s prying eyes, I picked through her selections for anything that I would actually wear. A miniskirt and a pale pink tank top went immediately into my discard pile. Next was a

dark red, long-sleeved shirt made out of an almost sheer cotton. Surprised that Allison had actually chosen something I might wear, I tried it on.

The shirt made me look even more pale than usual, but my green eyes were in sharp contrast, which I kind of liked. When I wore it to school, Allison would probably tell me that it was a bad color for me, then I could tell her that she had picked it out . . . totally worth it.

Along with the red shirt, I bought a new pair of jeans and a fitted, shiny dark brown leather jacket. The jacket was way more class than I was used to, but I figured my regular garb would help to dress it down. Lucy bought a red dress that I would never have guessed she would go for. Allison practically beamed.

We went to several more stores where Allison loaded Lucy and me up with more clothes, without losing an ounce of the same conviction she'd had in the first store. I was coerced into a few more clothing items, but ignored Allison's attempt to replace my beloved sneakers.

When the clothes shopping was finally finished, Allison insisted that we visit the makeup counter at one of the two larger department stores in the mall. Allison was drawn to the perfume counter like a moth to a flame, so I followed Lucy to browse all of the little sticks and squares of makeup.

Lucy held up two different tubes of lip-gloss in front of my face. "Which one do you think?"

Was she serious? I had never seen Lucy buy makeup before. She never expressed any sort of interest in it. "Um . . . " I replied, then quickly pointed to one of the tubes with my finger. "That one."

"You just randomly chose one, didn't you?"

I bit my lip. "Umm . . . yes."

Lucy smiled and shook her head at me, then called out, "Allison!"

Allison came trotting over with a little hot pink plastic bag that I assumed contained her new perfume. Upon observing Lucy's gloss dilemma, Allison turned Lucy back in the direction of the counter and started holding different glosses up against her face. Allison handed a peachy-pink tube back to me without a word. I apparently was to buy it. It was only six dollars so I decided not to argue. I could always just give it to my mom.

By the time Allison had finished with her, Lucy had two hands full of makeup. She shuffled to the counter to buy it all. I was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion that Lucy's new penchant for makeup had something to do with Dan. It worried me. I did *not* trust Dan to be with my best friend. I didn't trust Dan period.

After Lucy purchased her makeup, Allison finally announced that we were done. We left the hallway of horrors behind us and piled back into Allison's car to drive back to my house. Fifteen minutes later

we came crashing through my front door, hands full of bags. Lucy and Allison headed straight up to my room so that Al could give Lucy a makeup tutorial. I paused to toss my new tube of lip-gloss to my mom, who was sitting on one of the couches in our living room watching TV.

"Thanks hon," she called as I started up the stairs.

When I got to my room, Allison had already spread all of Lucy's makeup out on the floor. There was a pile of plastic wrappers, which had once encased the little containers, lying discarded to the side. Lucy and Allison were sitting on the floor facing each other, so I sat down near them, forming an uneven triangle.

"What's this?" I asked holding up a fat pencil with a light gold, shimmery tip.

"Highlighter," Allison answered, keeping her attention on her job of applying eye shadow to Lucy's eyelids.

"For *what*?"

Allison grabbed the pencil from my hand and crooked her finger at me. "Come here and I'll show you."

I raised my hands in surrender and scooted a little further away. I watched as Allison continued to work on Lucy's eyes. I found out what the highlighter stick was for . . . kind of. It didn't seem to make much difference, at least to my *untrained* eye. Once Allison was finally finished, Lucy turned to face me.

"What do you think?" she asked me.

Allison had done a good job. You could tell that Lucy was wearing makeup, but it was understated enough that it wasn't the first thing you noticed about her face. "It's . . . different," I answered hesitantly.

"It's perfect," Allison corrected. She held up a mirror in front of Lucy's face.

Lucy's eyes widened. "Wow, Al, I have to hand it to you, you know what you're doing."

Allison turned a wicked grin to me. "Your turn."

I held my hand up to my ear, as if hearing something far away. "Oh, what's that? I think I hear my mom calling me. Just a sec mom!" I stood and ran for the door before Allison could grab me.

Allison and Lucy left later that afternoon to eat dinner with their families, and I sat in my room to sulk. Spending time with my friends had temporarily distracted me from the fact that we would see Dan tomorrow, but now it was all I could think about it.

I sat with the portable phone beside me on the bed, debating on whether or not I should try to wiggle my way out of our plans. I hated admitting it, but I was afraid of Dan.

I sighed, then reached out a hand to push the phone away from me. I couldn't cancel. Lucy and Allison seemed to trust Dan. If

something happened and I wasn't there . . . well, I'd never be able to forgive myself, and that's just for starters. I was going. Everything would be all right . . . Yeah, and pigs can fly.

CHAPTER FIVE

By Saturday morning the feeling of dread was a hard knot in my stomach. I was sick with nerves that I didn't really know how to explain. That's a lie. About the lack of explanation I mean. I hadn't understood the bad feeling when I first met Dan, but I could explain it now. He was . . . different. Off. Not that different or off were necessarily bad things, but in Dan's case they definitely were.

I ran a brush through my hair and dressed mechanically in a black tank top, more holey jeans, and my ever-present sneakers. Allison would loooove it. I grabbed my new shiny brown leather jacket, just in case. The nights were starting to grow colder, warning us of winter, even though September had barely begun.

As I was heading downstairs, I heard a knock at the front door. I grabbed my satchel with my wallet and house keys as I trotted across the living room to answer it. Lucy was waiting in her new red dress and a pair of cute, funky brown boots that gave her a little more height. I hadn't seen her buy the boots on Friday, but I had avoided the shoe section like the plague, so that wasn't saying much. The outfit was a little dressy, well, okay, *a lot* dressy for Lucy's normal taste.

As soon as I beheld her garb I exclaimed, "I knew it! You bought all that stuff to impress Dan!"

She was even wearing her new makeup. Her almond shaped eyes were delicately lined in black, and her lips were freshly glossed. And was that perfume I smelled? Color me horrified.

I gave her a disapproving look.

Lucy's olive skin darkened with a blush. She turned and walked back toward the car where Allison waited, not saying a word.

Lucy wasn't getting off that easy. I shut and locked the door behind me, then quickly caught up to her side. "How can you like him? All he does is stare! And what about the weirdness at lunch the other day? I know you haven't forgotten about that. He's totally whacked," I hounded her.

"He's cute," she replied, "and he only stares at *you*, and that's probably because you treat him like he's some sort of freak. He's pretty normal once you actually talk to him, and the lunch thing was

just a joke." Lucy glanced through the car window at Allison, patiently waiting in the driver's seat, then gave me a look that clearly stated *don't tell Allison.* She slipped into the backseat before I could say anything else.

Frowning, I opened the car door and took my usual place in the front. Allison took my grumpy look in stride and started the car. She was dressed up as well, but that wasn't out of the ordinary. She wore dark-wash jeans, a dark purple cami, and one of those fitted vest thingies that were apparently in style in a dark gray. Her suede booted foot pressed on the gas, and we were on our way. The theater wasn't far from my house, well, nothing in Shelby is really *far,* but my anxiety at the whole Dan situation made the ten minute drive seem like hours.

Dan was already waiting when we pulled up into the parking lot of the old, dreary theater. The theater was originally built with only three screens, but had been expanded to fit seven. Dan stood with his arms crossed, dressed in casual gray slacks and a black v-neck t-shirt, topped with his brown leather jacket. His near-black hair was styled to perfection, as always. He looked expensive, and dangerous, or maybe I was just projecting. He watched us approach with his pale blue eyes, seemingly at ease. I was feeling anything but at ease.

We reached where he was standing and stopped a short distance in front of him. We then proceeded to stand there in awkward silence. I looked to Lucy and Allison, but Lucy stayed looking down and shuffling her feet, while Allison smiled goofily at Dan. I was surprised to see that Dan looked slightly nervous himself. He usually seemed so macho and self-possessed. An abashed grin began to creep across his face. Could he get any more confusing?

I sighed and gestured my arms toward the theater. "Shall we?"

Everyone nodded and we were finally able to vacate the parking lot. We continued across the sidewalk, past outdoor posters of movies I would have loved to see, but knew we wouldn't end up with. Allison and Lucy's boots clicked on the pavement while I followed behind them in my quiet sneakers. Dan held the door for us as we went inside, then stood too close to me as we purchased tickets to a generic chick flick that was detailed on the least appealing poster.

Our movie was in *theater seven,* all the way at the end of the hall. The walk to the proper screening room seemed to take ages, as did the process of choosing seats. Lucy, Allison, and I would usually sit in the row directly behind the hand railing that cut the theater in half. That way we could put our feet up on the bar, and not worry about any tall people sitting in front of us to block the view.

I almost thought we'd end up with different seats as Lucy and Allison just stood in the isle, waiting for Dan to move, but when he

didn't choose either, I sat where I wanted and waited for everyone else to follow.

Lucy sat next to me, then came Dan, then Allison. Lucy smiled a contented smile, while Allison looked less than happy. It seemed like Al had finally realized Lucy's intent in wearing her new outfit, and was none too happy for the competition. I was pretty sure that Lucy had won the competition before it even started, but for Allison, it ain't over 'till it's over.

We were early. The previews hadn't even started yet, and the silence was thick. Sighing, I nudged Lucy with my elbow. "I'm going to get some popcorn."

She nodded, not offering to go with me, so I climbed over the rail to go to the concession stand by myself.

"I'll join you," Dan announced, then hopped over the rail before I could protest.

Shaking my head, I walked out of the theater and toward the concession stand with Dan trailing slightly behind me. I was trying my hardest to ignore his presence, when he grabbed my arm from behind and spun me to face him. My heart skipped a beat. I looked at him, startled.

"What are you playing at?" he hissed.

"What are you talking about? Let me go!" I replied angrily, trying to pry my arm loose from his iron grip.

His blue eyes were very close, looking feral. His fingers squeezed my arm, hard enough to bruise. His hand was large enough to enclose my bicep entirely.

"Don't be stupid. I can smell you, just tell me," he snapped.

Smell me?

Taking in my puzzled expression, he hesitated, cocking his head to the side like he usually did when observing me. He gave me a crooked smile. "You don't know, do you?"

I kept the same stupid expression on my face, jaw slightly agape.

He laughed to himself and shook his head. "Um . . . nevermind, forget I said anything." He continued chuckling.

I opened my mouth to argue, but he simply turned around and walked back toward our section of the theater, moving with a carefree skip to his step.

I stood, stunned, rubbing my arm where he had grabbed me. I stayed like that for several minutes, not sure what my reaction should be. I finally walked back into the movie without popcorn. I had lost my appetite. I climbed back over the bar and sat down, ignoring a puzzled look from Lucy. At least the previews had finally started.

I rubbed my arm again where Dan had grabbed me. Yep, there was definitely going to be a bruise. I gave Dan a dirty look that he didn't

notice, then settled in to watch the movie. Once the movie started I tried to get into it, but ended up letting my mind wander. The feeling of dread was back in my stomach and my thoughts were dark. I was no longer simply creeped out, I was scared. I replayed my unnerving experience with Dan in my head, trying to puzzle out exactly what had happened.

By the time the movie ended I was no closer to coming up with an explanation. The credits began to roll and we all stood to leave the theater. After waiting behind the few shuffling people who had managed to reach the aisle before us, we finally made our way through and walked outside. The chilly breeze made me glad that I had brought my jacket. I slipped it on while only half listening as Lucy and Allison talked about the movie on the way back to Allison's car. I caught Lucy claiming that the movie was decent, once you got past the done-and-done-again plot . . . I hadn't noticed.

I walked a little ahead of our group, huddled in my jacket. I stopped and waited at Allison's car for everyone to catch up. I avoided Dan's gaze as they reached me and looked to Lucy instead. She had Dan's jacket draped over her shoulders.

Allison looked toward Dan and Lucy, then glanced at me. "Irvine's?" she asked the group.

Dan looked confused.

"It's a pizza parlor," Allison explained.

Dan nodded. "Yeah, we'll meet you there."

We? Dan gave a slight wave and walked away with Lucy tagging a short distance behind him.

"Where are you going?" I called after her.

"I'm riding with Dan. I'll see you guys there," Lucy replied nonchalantly as she looked over her shoulder at me. She paused at the worried look on my face, but quickly recovered and hurried after Dan.

I slid into the passenger seat of Allison's car with her already talking about Dan. " . . . . I can't believe Lucy snagged him. She has the best luck with guys . . . "

Allison prattled on about Dan as she started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, but I couldn't hear her as I became lost in my own thoughts. What was Dan's deal? What was *I* playing at? Why would he ask that? I shouldn't have let Lucy go with him. My original perception of him seemed to be holding true . . . he was a *creep.*

After we had been driving for a few minutes, Allison realized that I wasn't listening to her. She glanced at me with an annoyed expression. "Hello? Xoe? Are you listening?"

Snapping out of my thoughts, I answered, "Sorry Al, I just have a lot on my mind right now." I gave her my full attention.

"Like what?" she prompted, looking concerned as she watched the

road in front of us.

“Um, Dan said something weird to me,” I replied after a moment of hesitation.

Allison waited a few seconds, and then seeing that I wasn’t going to elaborate questioned, “Well? What did he say?”

As a scowl formed on my face, I began to rant, “First, he stares at me *all* week in English, but never says a word. He talks to you guys like you’re perfectly normal. Then he manhandles me in the theater, *demanding* to know what I'm up to!What is that supposed to mean!”

Perplexed, Allison asked, “What you're up to? I should think it quite obvious . . . you’re up to being crazy. And what do you mean, *manhandled*?”

“He grabbed my arm and got in my face!”

Allison glanced worriedly at me, finally taking me seriously. “Did you provoke him or something?”

I gave her an outraged look.

Allison had the courtesy to look abashed as she turned her attention back to the road. “Sorry, stupid question. Shouldn’t we just talk to him about it? Give him a chance to explain himself?”

I shook my head, my anger fading into confusion. “No, I don't think that's a good idea. Let’s just keep an eye on him, okay?”

“I guess,” Allison conceded, “though it’s probably all just a misunderstanding.”

Realizing that I still hadn’t convinced her, I stared at Allison angrily.

Allison reached a red light and tried to stare me down.

I kept staring right back, jaw clenched stubbornly.

Allison sighed. “I’m sure he was just joking. As for the staring, I think it’s all in your head. He just has a weird sense of humor.” The light turned green and she hit the gas.

I tried a calmer approach. “I have a bad feeling Al, I’ve had it all week, I can’t explain it, but I’m worried.”

The concern returned to Allison’s face. “We’ll keep an eye on him Xoe, but I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about.”

Hardly placated, I sat silently with my arms crossed the rest of the ride to Irvine’s.

We met Dan and Lucy in the parking lot and went inside the restaurant to order our pizza. The pizza at Irvine’s isn’t particularly good or anything, but it’s where we always went. We didn’t really have that many choices. Plus, Irvine’s is relatively adult-free.

The pizza parlor was decorated kind of like a retro diner. Red vinyl stools surrounded the counter and an old-style jukebox with neon lights dominated the back corner of the restaurant.We grabbed a booth that kept to the red vinyl theme and waited. Lucy sat next to

Dan, still wearing his coat, with her shoulder pressed against his arm. She looked tiny next to him, especially with the jacket engulfing her narrow shoulders. Everyone dutifully ignored the menacing glares I periodically aimed at Dan. The waitress came and went.

“Xoe?” Lucy asked eventually. I had spaced out from the conversation, as I tend to do.

“Huh?” I replied.

“I asked what your plans are for tomorrow,” she continued. “I was thinking about hiking. We haven’t gone up the trail behind your house in a while.”

Dan looked back and forth between the two of us, as if taking in every detail.

“Oh, yeah, sounds good,” I mumbled as the waitress arrived with our pizza.

She leaned much farther over the table than was necessary, drawing attention to her low-cut red blouse, and making eyes at Dan. Had all of the girls in town gone crazy? It was the only explanation. The smell of sausage and mushrooms wafted up from the pizza and my mood brightened a little. Food was always a sure-fire way to draw me out of my doldrums.

I looked up from the pizza to see that Lucy, Al, and ironically Dan (who was too rude to be polite) were all hesitating, not wanting to be the first one to grab a piece. Etiquette be damned, I dug right in, signaling to everyone else that the awkward moment could end. I chewed the mediocre pizza. Irvine’s really wasn't the best pizza around, but I don’t refuse pizza, average or otherwise.

I devoured two pieces while Lucy and Allison daintily nibbled on their first slices. Dan had taken one bite of his and left the rest abandoned on his plate. Creepier and creepier.

After we were all apparently done eating, we sat for another excruciating hour where I was forced to witness Al and Lucy fawning over Dan the entire time. By the time we finally decided to call it a night, I'd bitten my fingernails down to little nubs. Lucy rode with Dan again with a promise to call me tomorrow.

As soon as Allison dropped me off, I rushed inside to call Lucy, then realized that she might not be home yet, considering that maybe Dan didn’t speed like a maniac as Allison did. I decided to give her an extra fifteen minutes. I sat on the loveseat in my living room, drumming my fingers on a throw pillow in my lap, then after precisely 13.5 minutes I dialed Lucy’s number, letting it ring until the machine picked up. I hung up and waited another five minutes and called again.

“Hello?” Lucy’s voice buzzed back at me.

I let out a breath of relief. “Lucy? Are you okay? I shouldn’t have

let you go alone with Dan. There's something wrong with him. He said the weirdest thing to me . . . "

"Xoe," she buzzed back, interrupting me, "something weird happened."

I paused, waiting for her to continue. The dread was back full swing. I switched the phone to my other hand so I could wipe the sweat off my palm onto my jeans.

Lucy continued, "He walked me to the front door, then he leaned toward me. I thought he was going to kiss me, you know? Then I felt a sharp pain in my arm and realized . . . he *scratched* me."

Shocked, I questioned, "What? Like took his nails and raked you?"

I heard Lucy sigh on the other end of the line. "Xoe, it's going to sound crazy, but, well, his hand looked different . . . kind of like he had claws."

A moment of stunned silence passed.

"Claws?"

"Yeah," she said. "Or maybe it was just the dim lighting. I keep second guessing what I saw, but the proof is on my arm."

"Is this some kind of joke?" I was getting angry. I hated jokes like this. I'm the most skeptical person I know, so they never worked. All anyone ever succeeded in doing was making me mad. Though that didn't explain why my heart was caught in my throat.

"It's not a joke Xoe," Lucy replied, tears straining her voice.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Stay right there Lucy, I'm coming over," I ordered.

"No, you-ou can't, my parents will be home any minute." Lucy replied, hiccupping on her words. "I d-don't know what to do," she continued. "I'm scared Xoe. W-what if he comes back?"

I considered storming into her house anyway, but knew her parents would just send me back home. "Maybe you should call the cops and report the attack."

"And tell them what?" Lucy asked. "That m-my date scratched me, then politely went home?" She was getting louder as she spoke, edging on hysteria.

I felt numb, and wasn't quite sure what to say. "He just . . . left?" I asked finally.

"Yeah." She had suddenly roped in her sobs, regaining some of her composure. The fact that she had broken down at all was unnerving. Lucy never broke down. "I just stood there like a moron and watched him go."

I sighed. "What should we do?"

"What can we do?" she replied quickly. "I can't call the cops, I can't do anything. I don't understand what's going on." Lucy paused

and I heard voices in the background. “My parents just got home, they'll want me to get off the phone . . . I have to go. Keep the phone near you okay? Just in case. I’ll come over in the morning.”

“Have your mom drive you,” I ordered.

“Okay.”

I heard the phone click as she returned it to its cradle. I sat unmoving, except for drumming my fingers on the table . . . yeah, I could already tell that sleep would not come easy tonight.

I paced back and forth across the living room. My thoughts were racing a million miles per minute. Lucy’s story should have been hard to believe, but for some reason I didn’t think she was imagining things. It explained the bad feeling I had about Dan, and all of his weird behavior . . . kind of.

I went upstairs and tried to go to bed, but it was no use. I got up and sat at my desk, turning on my computer. Once it was on I stared at it, not really knowing what I had intended to do with it. Look up cases of people scratching other people? Somehow I didn’t think I would get much useful information from a search like that. I turned the computer back off and started pacing across my room. I hated inaction. I needed something proactive to do about the Dan situation, but I couldn’t think of a thing.

I went back downstairs to the living room and turned on the TV. The volume blared and I hurried to turn it down before it woke up my mom. She had gone to bed early since she had to wake up at 6:00 am for an early hike with one of her friends. I started flipping through the channels and stopped on what looked like a relatively high-budget, black-and-white horror movie on *AMC*.

A woman was running terrified through the woods. She kept looking back at whatever was chasing her, like they always do in horror movies. The camera panned back to a man in tattered clothing, presumably the woman’s pursuer. He paused on a hilltop framed by the full moon and turned into a . . .

My heart caught in my throat. It made sense, if I was willing to overlook the plausibility of it. All of Dan’s behavior: growling at Brian, cocking his head like a dog all of the time, saying he smelled me . . . scratching Lucy. Dan was a *werewolf*.

I sat for a moment, stunned, then laughed at myself. A werewolf? Werewolves weren’t real. They were the stuff of myth and legend. I ruefully shook my head and switched off the TV. Sleep. Sleep was what I needed. I rose from the sofa in deep consternation, and made my way back upstairs. I plopped down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Maybe Dan just *thought* he was a werewolf. While I couldn't quite believe that he was a supernatural being, I could easily believe that he was mentally unstable.

What seemed like an eternity later, I finally dozed off. I dreamed that I was on fire, but not burning. Everything around me burned, my room, my house, and distantly I knew that my mom and my friends were burning too. I could hear their screams, but I just stood there watching the flames. A wolf howled.

CHAPTER SIX

I woke to knocking on my bedroom door. My t-shirt and boxers that substituted for pajamas were once again damp with sweat from my vivid dreams.

"Xoe? It's me, Lucy . . . your mom let me in," a timid voice called from the other side of the door.

I sprung from my bed and rushed to the door, stumbling over a book on the floor, still only half-awake. Did I mention I'm not a morning person? I opened the door to find Lucy waiting on the other side. She was dressed down in a dark brown t-shirt, even darker suede jacket, worn jeans, and hiking boots. I faced her and tried to remain calm—that is until Lucy shrugged off her jacket to bare her upper arm.

"He mutilated you!" I exclaimed, examining the scratches on her arm.

"It's not that bad," she replied calmly, "but look at them, do they look like the work of human fingernails to you?"

As a matter of fact, they didn't. Four long, thin gashes marred her arm, deep enough to make me feel a little queasy at the sight. No, definitely not normal fingernails. I gingerly touched the area around the scratches. Her skin was burning hot.

I frowned. "Do you think you need stitches?"

Lucy shook her head. "I thought about it, but what would I tell the doctor?"

Good point. Lucy was trying to be calm, but her wide eyes gave her away. She was freaked. The dark circles under her eyes alluded to a sleepless night, and I didn't blame her. I wouldn't have been able to sleep either. I nodded and stood aside for Lucy to come into my room.

At the sound of footsteps, Lucy quickly shrugged back into her jacket. A few seconds later, my mom came around the corner from the stairway, dressed in a casual, gauzy green dress and flip-flops.

At the sight of Lucy my mom's face erupted into a smile that reached her warm brown eyes. "Have you had breakfast yet, Lucy?" she asked. "Our weekend breakfasts usually occur around noon, but we could make it a little earlier. It's been a while since I've seen you."

"No thanks," Lucy mumbled.

Taking in our expressions, a look of concern flashed across my mom's face. She pressed the back of her hand against Lucy's forehead. "Are you feeling okay, Lucy? You feel a little warm."

Lucy looked down at the floor, muttering that she was fine.

My mom looked back and forth between us, a frown creasing her brow. She reached up and felt my forehead. "You feel warm too honey, another dream?"

"Um, yeah, we'll talk about it later, 'kay?" I looked pleadingly at my mom. I hadn't told Lucy or Allison about my dreams.

She hesitated, but decided to let it go and headed back downstairs.

As soon as my mom was gone, we went into my bedroom and I shut the door. I continued into the adjoining bathroom and quickly brushed my teeth and washed my face, pulled on some jeans and a purple tank top, and went back into my bedroom barefoot to question Lucy.

"What dreams?" Lucy asked.

Sigh. Thanks a lot mom. "Um, I've just been having some weird dreams lately, nothing major."

"Please Xoe, I could use the distraction,"

I let out a loud breath. "For the past few months I've been having these *dreams*. I'm always surrounded by fire in some way, but I'm never scared. It's the weirdest feeling, almost peaceful."

Lucy studied my face, not understanding the significance. "What makes them different than any other dreams? I know you're not one to get freaked out by nightmares."

I looked down. "I don't know. They're just . . . different, and when I wake up I always have a fever."

"A fever? I guess that *is* kind of weird," Lucy conceded. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I just didn't think it was relevant," I replied. "Plus, I'm weirded out by them enough. I don't need to weird everyone else out too." I was feeling embarrassed and went for a subject change. "But now back to you, I think you have the more pressing matter."

"Yeah, yeah I guess I do," she mumbled.

"So what are our theories?" I asked her.

"Theories?" she replied, confused.

"Yeah," I answered, "those scratches are anything but normal, which means Dan probably isn't so normal either. Yesterday he told me he smelled me, and I *don't* stink. Now he's gone and scratched you, so I think there really is only one plausible theory. It's a little far-fetched I admit, but I've been thinking about it all night and it was all I could come up with."

Lucy just stared at me, a little green in the face.

"He thinks he's a werewolf," I stated matter-of-factly. I decided to

leave out the fact that my idea came from a movie. I didn't want to make my theory less plausible . . . if that was even possible.

Lucy laughed in a less than convincing manner, but didn't reply.

"Do you have any better ideas?" I asked, feeling slightly offended.

Lucy shook her head. "It's not that Xoe, it's just . . . I think he actually *is* a werewolf."

I blinked slowly at her as I tried to figure out whether or not she was joking. "Come again?"

Lucy continued unperturbed, "Just think about it Xoe, what else makes sense? What has superhuman smell and claws? I'm not imagining it. His hand was *not* a human hand."

"I don't know what makes sense!" I practically shouted. "But Dan being a werewolf sure doesn't! You have been watching *too* many horror movies. Werewolves don't exist."

"I know what I saw!" she shouted back.

"Look," I replied, calmly as she began to cry, "It's pretty far out there, but maybe you're right. I know you wouldn't make it up."

I thought about what Lucy had said. I knew she wouldn't make something like that up, but people's eyes play tricks on them all of the time. It wouldn't help for me to point that out to her though. "He does act kind of . . . dog-like," I offered.

Lucy sat on my bed, defeated. She sat that way for several minutes.

I waited while we both processed the implications.

Lucy shook her head. "I don't know Xoe. I understand why you don't believe me. I can hardly believe myself, but I know what I saw."

I grabbed Lucy's arm and gently pulled her to her feet. "Let's take a walk. We'll try to come up with some alternative theories."

The only problem was, that having considered the alternatives, I knew there weren't any. I mean, the best I could come up with was that Dan *thought* he was a werewolf, could I fault Lucy for thinking that he really was one? Who was I to say that such things didn't exist? The legends had to come from somewhere.

The problem was that the only information I had came from movies, and the werewolves, according to the films, were always different. Some could only be killed by silver bullets, and others would die if you just whacked 'em with a big stick enough times. Some just changed once a month, on the night of the full moon, others changed the whole week of the full moon, and others could change at will. We needed answers, and answers we did not have. I guess we'd find out if Lucy's crazy theory was not so crazy after all once the full moon rolled around.

I moved my grip from Lucy's arm and took her trembling hand to lead her downstairs. The truth was what it was, even if big and growly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I stopped by my backdoor to slip on my hiking boots and a jean jacket on our way outside. We journeyed out across my backyard together, then headed into the woods where Lucy and I had met so many years ago. We reached a damp, narrow trail that led through the tall pine trees to the wider, more used trail that connected to a different road. Running water sounded from a stream in the distance. It sounded close, but in reality, it was about two miles away. A cool breeze was blowing, scented with the autumn leaves.

Lucy fell in step behind me, seemingly lost in thought. Usually walking out in the woods was peaceful, but I could almost taste the tension emanating from Lucy. I glanced back at her a couple of times, but waited for her to talk first. She needed time to process things. She was so quiet that if not for the sound of her footfalls, I wouldn't have known that she was there. We walked for a good ten minutes that way, her trailing behind me, neither of us saying a word.

Lucy's voice finally cracked the silence. "Do you think I'm going to be a werewolf now? I mean, if that's what Dan is . . ."

So we were going with the werewolf theory then. That she took it so seriously made it seem more real to me, which I wasn't exactly grateful for. "I don't know," I answered honestly over my shoulder, "but whatever happens, we'll get through it, even if I have to lock you in a cage once a month."

Lucy quickened her stride to walk beside me. "A cage?" she asked.

I glanced at her. "Well, maybe not a cage," I replied, "though I don't know what else to use. We could just lock you in a room, but seeing as neither of us knows anything about werewolves, or whether or not Dan is one, I'd say better safe than sorry."

Lucy thought for a moment, then responded, "A cage it is then."

"We'll get online and do some research tonight. We of course won't find any solid answers, but knowing all of the legends can't hurt."

"Xoe," Lucy began slowly. "When I first thought of the werewolf thing, I freaked out and looked up the date of the full moon. It's tomorrow."

My mouth went dry. "I guess we'll need to find a cage sooner rather than later?" I asked half-heartedly.

We stopped walking and sat on a felled tree on the side of the trail.

“Do you think we should tell Allison?” Lucy asked, changing the subject.

I smiled. “She might not believe us.” At Lucy's expression I corrected, “Okay, she definitely won’t believe us. Though, I guess she’d have to at least consider it if you showed her the scratches.”

“I don’t know,” Lucy countered. “She may not believe it even then. I’m still not sure I do.”

I frowned. “Even if we tried to keep it quiet, she can always tell when we’re trying to hide something from her. Remember the incident of the ruined shoes?”

Lucy gave a small smile. “How could I forget?”

I smiled back. “If she asks, we’ll tell her, and she can decide for herself whether to believe us or not.”

Lucy nodded as the smile slipped from her face.

I felt my smile slip too as I looked down at the ground. There wasn’t much more to say, so we sat in melancholy silence. I could feel the moisture from the tree trunk seeping through my jeans, making me cold. I focused on scratching a patch of lichen off of a nearby rock, rather than thinking too hard on our problem. Little green flakes fell to the damp earth as I picked away.

I needed to put on a brave face for Lucy. I had a feeling that my calmness was the last thing holding her together. If I were her, I’d be falling apart right about now. I was near to falling apart as it was.

Finally, we got up and continued walking farther into the woods. Usually I would have brought my backpack with water, first aid kit, and pepper spray if we were going any sort of distance, but I guess my mind had been too preoccupied to remember when we left my house. It was stupid of me. You never know what might happen.

We had both been watching the ground in front of us for several minutes when Lucy turned her attention to the trail ahead. She paused with instant fear at what she saw.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I looked up to see what had stopped her. Dan was waiting expectantly farther up the trail. He was dressed in a green t-shirt, jeans, and his brown leather jacket, his hair styled to its usual perfection. He didn't make a move toward us. He just stood there and stared.

My heart sped as I wiped sweaty palms on my jeans. "W-what do you want?" I stammered loudly, backing up.

He just stood there watching us, then began to come forward.

I shouted, "Don't come any closer or I'll—" I blinked and he was only a few feet away. How had he moved so fast?

"Or you'll what?" he interrupted.

The next thing I knew he shoved me, then I was on the ground, looking at the branches above me, blue sky shining through. My vision swam, then darkness swallowed the branches whole.

I WOKE to deep blue eyes worriedly looking into my groggy green ones, and realized someone was shaking me. I scuttled backwards out of my assailant's grasp like a demented crab to take in the stranger who had been hovering over me.

Tousled deep brown hair, and a scruffy yet handsome male face went with the dark blue eyes that had been above me. He had a narrow, sweeping nose and his eyes were lined by a dark splash of lashes. Only his strong, sharp jaw and several days worth of stubble saved his face from femininity. He was about 6'1" with a, might I say, rather nice physique; lean, yet muscled. He wore a dark green sweater, worn jeans, and dark brown hiking boots that had definitely seen better days.

He tried to hide a laugh at my frenzied scuttle, and I was too freaked to get mad. There was still the question of why I had been on the ground, unconscious in the woods with only this handsome stranger to blame. It was only when I saw Lucy standing behind the stranger unharmed, that I was able to stuff my heart back down my throat.

They both watched and waited for me to talk.

Something tickled at the edge of my memory. "Dan! Where'd he

go?" I shrieked. I remembered Dan attacking us now, well, I remembered him attacking me, before I lost consciousness.

Lucy shuffled forward, pale and wide-eyed. Her jeans were dirty and her soiled jacket was torn at the elbow. "Dan pushed you down. I tried to run toward you, but suddenly he had me on the ground too. He was so fast Xoe. I tried to struggle, but he pressed me down until I couldn't move. He said I had to come with him.He said I would be . . . dangerous." Lucy paused as she glanced at Jason, then quickly went on, "The next thing I knew, Jason was there, tearing him off me." Tears began to well in Lucy's already puffy eyes.

I dizzily stumbled to my feet, then grabbed Lucy in a hug, feeling pine needles in her hair. "Where did he go?"

"I-I don't know," Lucy said.

I pulled away from Lucy and turned to this so-called Jason character. "Where did he go?" I asked more confidently. "I can't believe he just gave up that easily."

Jason studied me for a moment, as if considering which answer would upset me the least, then shrugged, apparently deciding on no answer at all.

"You were the only one vertical at the time. You had to see him leave," I pressed.

He shrugged again. "My attention was on making sure that the two of you were unharmed. I did not see where he went."

"So you were completely unconcerned with the stranger that you found in the woods attacking two people?"

Shrugging again, he smirked and walked up to grab my arm. "I will walk you girls home."

I ripped my arm away from him and got in his face. "We need the truth. Something weird is going on and it is just *way* too convenient that you were there at just the right time. No offense, but Dan is bigger than you, and I don't think he would exactly run screaming at the sight of you. Your story don't wash pal."

He reached out brushed back a strand of my hair that had fallen into my eyes. I jerked away, startled.

He chuckled at my reaction.

I pointed my finger a few inches away from his face. "Now, is *so* not the time to mess with me."

He smiled. "I can see that, but we do need to get you both home. It's not safe out here."

I grabbed Lucy and stormed back down the trail, with Jason following a short way behind us. Though Lucy had stopped crying, she was leaning heavily on me as if she'd fall without my support. We stumbled on as Jason caught up to walk on my other side. I focused on the trail, trying to hide the fact that my heart was thundering in

my ears.

“I spoke the truth,” he said. “I don't know why he fled. Do you know him?”

Sighing, I answered a bit more breathily than I would have liked, “Yeah, we know him . . . unfortunately.”

I walked a little faster, trying to end the conversation.

Jason simply matched my stride and pressed on. “Have you spent much time with him?”

I frowned at him, almost tripping on a stone. I had to pause for a moment and get a better grip on Lucy. “I thought you were just the ‘innocent bystander', not involved in the situation, so why do you care?”

Jason thought for a moment, then shrugged again. “Just making conversation,” he said, effectively ending the conversation.

By the time we arrived at my house, Lucy had somewhat regained her composure, though her normally self-assured eyes still had haunted shadows chasing across them.

I put my hand on her back in a comforting gesture. She was trembling ever so slightly; a frightened mouse came to mind. I pushed Lucy in through the back door and turned to Jason. “There’s something weird about your story, well okay, a whole lotta somethings. You know more about Dan than you’re letting on. I trust you as much as I trust him. Stay away from Lucy.”

That carefree smirk returned to his face, but within a moment wiped clean to leave his expression all stony-serious. His deep blue eyes looked angry. “Stay out of the woods, and stay away from Dan. He *is* dangerous,” he warned, holding my gaze to make sure I understood.

“Thanks, but tell me something I *don't* know,” I replied, then slammed the door in his face. So maybe he didn’t deserve my temper, but then again, maybe he did.

I walked up to my room to find Lucy already sitting on my bed, staring blankly at a framed picture of her, Allison, and me, standing together with large grins on our faces. We’d taken it over the summer by Allison’s pool. The summer seemed very far away.

Realizing my presence, she looked up and asked, “Can I stay over tonight, Xoe?” Her eyes pleaded with me.

I knew my mom wouldn’t mind Lucy staying over on a Sunday, but Lucy’s strict parents were a whole other story. “You’re welcome to, if you can convince your parents.”

Lucy gave me a small smile. “They left for Portland to visit my uncle this morning, remember? They would actually prefer it if I stayed here. My sister is staying at a friend's house too.”

Well that settled that.

My mom, as expected had no problem with Lucy staying over. She ordered us a pizza and the three of us sat in the living room with the pizza box on the coffee table. I grabbed my first slice and began to wolf (no pun intended) it down. Lucy's first piece sat forlornly on her paper plate.

My mom watched Lucy carefully. "Not hungry?"

Lucy looked up from her plate, startled. "Oh, um, no, not really hungry."

My mom patiently waited for Lucy to elaborate.

I tried to distract her. "When are you leaving for Washington, mom?"

My mom glanced at me for a moment. "Probably Wednesday." She turned her attention back to Lucy. "Besides your hike, you've been here all day. I haven't seen you eat."

Lucy pushed her plate a little farther away from her. "My stomach has been upset lately."

My mom nodded and seemed to settle for Lucy's answer, but I caught her glancing at Lucy skeptically out of the corner of her eye for the rest of the evening.

When all that was left was a cheese-soaked box, we headed back to my room. Lucy borrowed one of my t-shirts and some plaid pajama pants to sleep in. While she got ready for bed in my bathroom (she stayed over enough to warrant her own toiletries kit), I toured around the house and made sure the doors and all of the windows were locked. Paranoid, who me?

I paused as I passed the hall mirror. I looked at my reflection numbly. Things hadn't really set in yet. I felt as if I were walking in a dream. I lightly touched the carved wood frame of the mirror, half expecting it to disappear, just a fragment of this horrible dream. Firm, solid wood pressed beneath my fingertips.

I returned to my room to find Lucy staring blankly from her perch on my bed. I spared her a final worried glance then took my turn in the bathroom. By the time I was finished brushing my teeth and picking stray pine needles out of my hair that I hadn't noticed until then, Lucy was curled up into a ball on my bed, fast asleep.

I crawled into bed next to her and stared at the ceiling. In my head, I reviewed all of the events of the weekend. Reason told me to assume that Jason was in league with Dan, but my gut was inexplicably arguing against that possibility. I instantly wanted to trust him, just like I instantly wanted to distrust Dan.

I finally fell asleep to visions of werewolves dancing in my head.

CHAPTER NINE

Lucy seemed to be feeling a little more steady in the morning. We each took our turns in the shower and I let her borrow some of my clothes. She had to cuff the jeans a few times, but the long-sleeved, navy cotton shirt fit her pretty well. Hoorah for the bustily-challenged. I dressed in my usual theme: jeans, dark blue v-neck t-shirt, and my ubiquitous sneakers.

We ran downstairs and grabbed granola bars for breakfast. I filled my travel mug with coffee from the pot my mom, saint that she is, had made. I added a small amount of creamer and pushed the lid onto my mug, making that moist suction noise that travel mugs tend to make. I glanced at the clock to see that it was already 7:15. We rushed out the door to fast-walk to school.

Our silence was weighted with fear and worry. Neither of us wanted to be the one to break it. I think we both were all too aware that the full moon was fast approaching. Tonight we would have answers, or at least one answer. So much was still unexplained.

Lucy's timid voice cracked the silence. "So, um, if we're right about Dan, what are we going to do? I mean, if I'm to believe that werewolves exist, then it would also stand to reason that some of the legends about them exist . . . " She stared at the ground, refusing to meet my eyes.

"We'll think of something. I won't let you go through this alone, even if your theory is right, and I'm starting to think it is. Why else would Dan say that you would be dangerous?" I asked.

"I know," Lucy said. "I've been thinking about that too."

I hesitated on my next question, not sure if I would make things worse by asking. "Are you scared?"

Lucy stopped walking and met my eyes. "Terrified."

I kept my gaze locked on hers until she looked back down and began walking again. I followed shortly behind her. The ensuing silence was no less strained. We arrived at school just as the first bell rang, and we parted to go to our respective classes. I reached biology and slid into my seat next to Allison just as the second bell rang. I was unable to concentrate on the lecture, which was nothing new, but this time it was more than my short attention span standing in my way.

Once class was over, I met with Lucy before second period. We sat in our usual seats in the front, but Lucy was so obviously not her usual self. She kept her eyes on her desk and did not raise her hand to answer one single question. I guess I couldn't blame her. The teacher darted a few concerned glances at Lucy, but apparently decided to leave her alone. Lucy didn't seem to notice.

At lunch Lucy and I waited at our table, both of us deep in thought. Neither of us had remembered to grab lunch as we rushed out the door that morning.

"What's with you two today?" Allison questioned as she sat down in her slim-fit jeans and pink button-up blouse with her purchased lunch. "You both look like you've seen a ghost."

I looked up and forced myself to smile. "There's nothing wrong, we're fine."

Lucy nodded her head in agreement. "We're fine."

Our denials did nothing to placate her. Allison pressed on, "Out with it. The two of you are hiding something and you are going to tell me what it is right this instant."

Well, when she put it that way . . . I started from the beginning.

By the time I had finished filling Allison in on the events she had missed over the weekend, she was staring at me in stunned silence. "You're kidding," she sputtered. "I don't get the joke guys, what's the punch line?" She looked back and forth between the two of us, eyebrows raised.

"No punch line." I replied as Lucy lifted her sleeve to expose her scratches as evidence.

Allison grabbed Lucy's arm and thoroughly examined the scratches. Lips pursed, Allison took a moment to consider the unlikely situation. "This is so not funny," Allison said finally.

I gave her a blank look.

Allison looked back and forth between Lucy and me. "C'mon guys," Allison pleaded, "joke's over."

I sighed, "No joke, no punch line. We're not entirely sure about our conclusion yet, but . . . "

Allison snorted loudly. "I simply cannot believe that Lucy is going to," then she lowered her voice, "turn into a werewolf tonight, but I suppose I can afford to humor you two. If this turns out to be some elaborate prank, I will not be pleased."

"Humor us all you want Al. I'd love it if this were a joke. We'll all find out tonight," I said tiredly.

"So what then? We'll just tie Lucy up and wait out the full moon?" Allison asked.

Now it was Lucy's and my turn for stunned silence.

"Well?" Allison questioned raising her eyebrows, "Do either of you

have a better idea?"

Lucy looked at me.

Shrugging I turned to Allison. "My place or yours?"

Allison snorted, then we all huddled together to discuss our plans. I felt better having Allison involved, and I could tell that Lucy did as well. Three heads were better than two.

Once everything was settled, we just had to wait out three more classes. Then we would set our sorta-plan into action. We would all go together to the local hardware store to try and find some sort of restraints, then we would wait at my house until the sun started to go down.

We discussed just waiting for the full moon at my house, but I wasn't about to put my mom in danger of being eaten or whatever it is that werewolves do. In the end, we decided that we would tell my mom we were going to Allison's, but instead we would drive out into the woods to tie Lucy up and see what happened.

Our plan was awful at best, and I was anxious to get it over with. Considering Lucy's possible fate, and what might happen to Allison and me should our restraints fail, wasting our time in class seemed all too pointless. At least, I thought it did. Lucy refused to miss class, even under the extreme circumstances.

For the first time in my life, gym went by painstakingly slow. Not even dodge ball could distract me from the ever-ticking clock. I walked into English, ready to count the minutes, and my heart skipped a beat. Dan was in class.

"You have some nerve!" I stormed up to him. "I can't believe you're showing your face around here! I'm going to . . . "

"Xoe!" Ms. Masterson thundered. "Sit down right this minute! What's wrong with you?"

I plunked down into my chair, sparing a mutinous glare for Ms. Masterson's turned back. Dan chuckled. Chuckled! I could barely contain my fury. Brian gave me a concerned glance from his spot on the other side of me. I sat and fumed, clenching the sides of my desk, white-knuckled. My face felt afire. My anger was a palpable thing.

Dismissing my outburst, Ms. Masterson had barely begun her lecture, when the classroom door opened and interrupted her. And who should walk in but Jason, our supposedly valiant rescuer, dressed in a red flannel shirt and faded jeans. This *had* to be a dream. I mean c'mon. He took the empty seat behind me while Ms. Masterson glared at him. Jason's appearance had cooled my anger by a few degrees, replacing it with confusion.

I stared at Dan. He ignored me, a small, infuriating smile on his face. I could feel Jason's eyes on us. After what seemed like a lifetime of me staring at Dan, Brian glancing worriedly at me, and Jason

watching all three of us—the bell finally rang.

Dan stood quickly and rushed out the door. I was blocked from him by the other students shuffling out of the classroom. By the time I pushed past everyone and reached the hall he was nowhere to be found. I felt stupid for not having predicted his escape. I really hadn't thought he'd run. I whirled on Jason, who was walking out of the classroom behind me.

Hands on hips, I stared up into his dark blue eyes, just now noticing his clean-shaven face and less scruffy appearance, though his hair was still a tousled mess. Hmm, he did have a nice smile . . . wait. I mentally slapped myself for getting distracted,

I crossed my arms, put on a stern face, and took on a bad Cuban accent. "Jaaason, you got some 'splainin to do." I still wasn't buying the story he'd given us yesterday, now more than ever. He knew more about Dan than he had let on and he was going to tell me what that was.

"Skip sixth period," he replied with a smile. "Let's take a walk."

I nodded, ignoring the risks. What was the worst that could happen?

Don't answer that.

Avoiding the not-so-watchful security guards, we slipped outside and began our walk. A surprise gust of chilly air blew my hair back from my face as we went. I glanced up at the sky as we walked off school grounds to see ominous clouds promising yet more rain. The smell of ozone was thick in the air. Joy.

"I think that Lucy may be in trouble," Jason began.

"Tell me about it," I replied. "Dan *scratched* her. We have some theories, but the most prominent one means that Lucy's 'trouble' will start tonight, and I think you know something about it." I stopped walking and looked at him expectantly.

A bitter smile crept across his face, doing nothing to mar his handsomeness . . . not that I noticed or anything. "You are correct," Jason confirmed. "Dan is indeed a werewolf, and Lucy will likely become one too. Now the question is, what are we going to do about it?"

My jaw dropped. I hadn't expected him to confirm everything I'd just said. He said *werewolf* like the word didn't hold a world of implications.

"Yep," I replied weakly as I started walking again, still feeling shocked and unsure. "That's the $10,000 question. So far we've come up with tying her to a tree in the woods."

Jason stumbled at my words, shock plain on his face. He recovered quickly, running his hands through his messy, dark brown hair. "Um, only if you are going to tie her up with silver chains."

“Oh,” I continued. “You wouldn’t happen to have any of those lying around?” I smiled sweetly and sarcastically fluttered my eyelashes at him.

“I’ll see what I can do,” He answered nonchalantly.

Oh. I hadn’t been serious about him having silver chains. I stopped again and looked up at him curiously, wondering if he was just messing with me. When he showed no signs of pointing at me and saying *gotcha*, I decided to push things a little further. “So it’s true that silver affects werewolves?”

“Only the newly turned. Silver loses its potency after the first few shifts.”

I nodded, feeling incredibly silly for quizzing a stranger about werewolves. “Now the question is, how do you know about all of this, and how can you expect me to believe it?”

Jason ignored my question and began walking again.

“Hey!” I shouted. “What gives? I was honest with you, wasn’t I? I think I deserve an answer.”

He stopped and turned to consider me, concern plain on his face. We had neared the city park. He jerked his head slightly, gesturing for me to follow him. We trod a short distance more through the grass, then stepped onto the slightly damp sand of the currently empty playground. Jason sat down on the black rubber seat of a chain-link swing and motioned for me to take the swing next to him.

“To answer one of your questions, I expect you to believe everything about Dan being a werewolf, because you already do. You wouldn't have walked out here with me if you hadn't already caught on. In answer to the question of how I know about these things, I will make you a deal,” Jason smiled. “Let us handle this situation with Lucy, as we're running out of time, then I will tell you anything you wish to know.”

“Anything?” I questioned.

“Anything.”

I glared at him skeptically, but then conceded, I didn’t really have much choice but to trust him, for Lucy’s sake. We sat on the swings discussing Lucy’s “problem”. Well, mostly I sat scraping the toes of my shoes in the damp sand as my swing drifted back and forth while Jason tried to explain to me exactly what was going to happen to Lucy that night.

I was relieved to have someone that at least knew something of what was going on. I knew I should have a million questions for him, but besides the question of how he knew about werewolves, I was at a loss. I gripped the chains of the swing, squeezing hard enough to make oval indents in my palms, trying to remain steady. I just had to hold on until the night was through. After that I could fall apart.

Our conversation had ebbed, then Jason asked suddenly, “If you were so suspicious about Dan, why did you go out with him on Saturday?”

I gave him an ‘isn’t it obvious’ look.“Lucy and Al were set on going. I couldn’t let them go alone.”

“But what good did you hope to accomplish by going with? How did you intend to protect them?”

I paused in consternation. How did I intend to protect them? Truthfully, I hadn’t though about it. I just knew that I had to go with them. At least that way, I’d know that I had tried. I answered, frustrated with my inability to explain, “I just had to go, even if I couldn’t do any good, I couldn’t let them go alone.”

“You’re a good friend,” he stated simply.

“Exactly.” I smiled at him, happy with his ability to sum up my situation.

With that, he rose from his swing and I followed suit. We started walking back toward the school. I amused myself by watching my sneakers as they squashed down the blades of moist green grass. We’d run out of werewolf conversation, so we walked in silence. Surprisingly, the silence wasn’t awkward.

I stumbled on a loose rock at one point and slipped backward on the grass. I had closed my eyes, waiting for my butt to hit the ground, when I realized that Jason had caught me with his hands under my upper arms, right before I hit. One moment he had been beside me, and the next he was in position to catch me, too fast for me to follow.

My heart fluttered. Please don’t let him be another werewolf. He hoisted me back up and smiled at my mumbled thank you. I walked a little ahead of him after that, trying to hide my bright red embarrassed face as well as my cautious eyes.

We walked up to the school parking lot just as Lucy and Allison arrived. Jason nodded to Lucy and left, saying he would meet us at my house. I watched him walk to what was apparently his car. Now I don’t know cars, but this one looked expensive . . . and fast. The paint was a glossy charcoal gray that would be mistaken for black in the night. Nice.

Allison broke me out of my daydream of getting into that car with Jason. “So *that’s* where you were.”

I gave her a quizzical look.

“During geometry. Not that I condone ditching, but he looks like a pretty good reason.”

“That was Jason, the guy we met in the woods. I’ll explain on the way to my house,” I answered.

We piled into Allison’s car for the short ride to my house. Lucy in front and me in the back for a change.

As soon as we pulled out of the parking lot, Lucy turned to look at me in the backseat. “I thought we didn’t trust him,” she said, referring to Jason.

I met her eyes. “I’m not sure that we do, but he admitted to knowing more about Dan than he let on. Dan is in fact a werewolf, or so I’m told, and Jason seems to know quite a bit about werewolves, so we need his help, trust or no trust.”

Lucy looked down for a moment, then met my eyes steadily. “Did he say how likely it is that I’m . . . infected?”

I patted her shoulder, trying to be comforting and failing. I answered honestly, “He said it’s a good possibility.”

Lucy turned back around to stare out her window.

I went on, speaking to the back of Lucy’s head, “Let’s just try and not worry too much until we actually know what’s going on. Jason and Dan could both just be crazy. We're only going along with any of this to err on the side of caution.”

Lucy gave the barest of nods, but stayed staring out at the passing trees.

“So . . . same plan still?” Allison asked hesitantly.

“We’re going to tweak it just a little,” I replied, then went on to detail my conversation with Jason.

By the time we arrived at my house we had agreed on the rough plan. Jason would obtain restraints for Lucy, we would restrain her, and then we would wait. So, not the most elaborate plan, but better than nothing.

We went inside and Lucy and I journeyed to the kitchen to scrounge for food, our stomachs growling for having missed lunch. My bright, sunny kitchen, with walls painted a yellow so light it’s almost white seemed out of place with our current moods. Maple cabinets, white tile counter tops, and plenty of plants in multicolored ceramic pots complete the cozy, cottage-like feel. I could tell that Lucy felt anything but cozy.

We found my mom standing by the coffee pot, drinking a freshly made cup. My mom and I are different in a lot of ways, but we both run on the same fuel—coffee. We had actually recently agreed to try and cut back. It wasn’t going too well.

All we could find to eat was a box of macaroni and cheese of indeterminate age and some rice cakes. Mac and cheese it was. I set about making it while my mom quizzed us about our day at school, receiving only vague and generic answers. Once the mac and cheese was done I divided it into blue ceramic bowls. I grabbed a cup of coffee, standing by my conviction that coffee goes with everything, and Lucy and I went into the dining room to sit and eat at the pale wood table.

I watched Lucy out of the corner of my eye as we ate. She rubbed her arm, with a nervous strain to her face. Allison had stayed in the kitchen to talk to my mom. I eavesdropped until Allison mentioned a sale at a local boutique, then quickly tuned them out. I focused on making myself swallow the macaroni. Yeah, I was beginning to get an idea of its age.

As we finished eating, my mom came into the dining room and grabbed our bowls to stack in the dishwasher. Lucy and I headed upstairs to my room. Allison said a quick goodbye to my mom, then followed us up. We sat on my plush beige carpeting pow-wow style.

"So tell me more about Jason," Allison began.

Rolling my eyes, I answered, "We don't know much, just what we told you about what happened in the woods."

Allison pouted at the lack of details on the new cute boy.

"So he knows about werewolves?" Lucy interjected.

"Um, apparently so," I replied. "I asked him how he knew, but he said he'd explain it later."

"I'm not sure how I feel about him being involved," Lucy said. "We know even less about him than we do about Dan. Why wouldn't he tell you how he knew about all of this werewolf stuff? For all we know he could be working with Dan."

I shrugged. I didn't want to tell her that I was simply acting on my gut instinct in trusting him. "What choice do we have?"

Lucy's face screwed up in consternation. "Good point."

"Plus," Allison added. "You must admit, the boy is not bad to look at." I rolled my eyes at her and she went on, "C'mon Xoe, don't act like you didn't notice, I saw you making moon-eyes at him as he went to his car, and don't get me started on the car." She smiled with a sigh and looked away, as if imaging the car in her mind.

"Okay," I conceded. "I admit that he is not bad to look at, but there are much more pressing issues to focus on."

Allison dismissed me with a wave of her hand. "When is he supposed to come?"

"I don't know . . . " I began to reply when I was interrupted by a knock on my bedroom door.

My mom waited for me to open the door, then gave me her best scrutinizing look.

"What?" I asked, confused.

She placed her hands on her hips. "Did you forget to tell me something?"

I gave her a blank stare.

She continued, "Care to explain why two young men are waiting downstairs?"

Two? "Oh, er, um, just friends coming over to study mom, geez," I

replied as nonchalantly as possible.

She walked away with a look of motherly knowing and I followed her downstairs.

The second boy in question was Max, who stood just inside the closed front door. The very Max that had been sitting with Dan the dreadful day that Allison dragged him to our lunch table. Max was short for a guy, about 5'4". He had shaggy, sandy blond hair and the kind of complexion that would freckle like crazy if Shelby ever got any measure of sun. His pale green eyes were staring intently at the floor while his hands nervously straightened his striped polo shirt and khaki cargo pants.

I raised an eyebrow at Jason, wanting an explanation for Max's presence. He was still dressed in his flannel and jeans. He glanced toward the ceiling and gave his head a slight nod, signaling that we should go upstairs. I was instantly suspicious of how he knew my bedroom was upstairs, but soon felt silly when I realized he had seen me come down as he waited at the door.

Sighing, I invited Max and Jason to my room where Lucy and Allison waited. They followed me upstairs without a word. We entered my room and I shut the door so that the questioning could begin.

The second the latch clicked, I whirled on Jason. "What is *he* doing here?" I spat, pointing my finger at Max. "He's in league with Dan, I *saw* them sitting together."

"Hey!" Max interrupted. "I'm not in *league* with him. I could tell he was a wolf, so I tried to talk to the guy, then I realized that he's completely nuts." He crossed his arms, looking like a grumpy elf.

Wait, a *wolf*? "Don't tell me you're one too," I groaned.

"Well yeah," Max answered, holding his head high, "but I'm not a bad one, I'm here to help." He head remained high, proud to not be a "bad one".

I turned back to Jason as he started pulling things out of a dark blue backpack to show to us: a length of shiny silver chain, two sets of handcuffs, and a medical case. Lucy looked ready to pass out.

"What's in the case?" I asked.

"Tranquilizers," Jason answered, shifting his focus from his "supplies" to acknowledge me. Taking in my shocked expression, he elaborated. "First we'll chain her up. The chains and cuffs are solid silver. Then if she starts to change, we tranquilize her. It won't stop the change, but it will slow it down and stop her from hurting herself." He opened the medical case and showed us several syringes and vials of clear liquid.

Lucy had now gone from pale to green. Allison noticed and sat Lucy down on my bed. Jason looked questioningly at Lucy, deep blue eyes pinched with concern.

I didn't feel too hot myself. I do *not* like needles. Even thinking about getting a shot makes me queasy, and getting blood drawn, forget about it. I can't even watch people get shots on TV. There is a very justified reason why my ears aren't pierced.

"Well it's only 5:00 right now," Allison announced, taking everyone's attention off the tranquilizers. "What time is she supposed to *change* at?"

"Full dark," Max responded. "Around 8:00. We shouldn't do it here though. Jason found a place."

We all looked at Jason still squatting on the floor beside his backpack. He stared back.

"Lead on," I said in a booming voice, dramatically thrusting my arm toward the door.

Jason chuckled. He was the only one. At least someone found me amusing.

Jason gathered the supplies and shoved them back into his backpack, then we all trooped out of my room and downstairs single file. I told my mom we were staying at Lucy's. Luckily I hadn't mentioned to my mom that Lucy's parents weren't in town. At her further questioning I answered that of course the boys were going home by nine, and out we went into the crisp evening air.

Jason's nifty car was waiting out front for us. Apparently my wish for a ride was about to be fulfilled, if not in the same fashion I had imagined. Jason opened the car door and lowered himself into the driver's seat, unlocking the other doors as he did so. I snagged the front passenger seat, leaving everyone else to pile into the back. Lucy ended up squished in the middle between Allison and Max. Jason started the ignition and the David Bowie CD that was in his player started to play. A man after my own heart. Away we went, into the unknown.

CHAPTER TEN

We drove away from town to the mostly abandoned industrial district, passing by empty lots and dilapidated buildings as we went. The slowly eroding buildings were all a depressing gray that caused them to blend in with the murky sky. The district has the feel of a ghost town. Only transients and other seedy characters dwell there these days.

I glanced at the door to make sure it was locked, then looked at Lucy's face in the rear view mirror. She had her eyes pinched shut like she was trying to pretend that nothing was happening. I couldn't imagine how she felt. I was scared enough just being involved in the situation. Lucy had to face the fact that she might become a werewolf in a world where we would have never imagined such things existed.

The crunch of gravel on asphalt along with the slowing of the car brought my attention back to our surroundings. Jason had pulled into the back lot of an empty, cavernous warehouse and was driving into an already opened bay. Once inside, he parked, then we all got out to survey our surroundings. Jason walked back to shut the bay door behind us while Max took several electric camping lanterns out of the trunk of Jason's car.

Max turned on each lantern as he placed them around the expansive, creepy, dusty room. I looked up and everything was black, there was no telling how high the ceiling was. I felt the darkness pressing down on me, inciting panic, like reverse claustrophobia. I took slow breaths, in and out, hoping no one noticed. I drew my hand over the beads of cold sweat that had formed on my brow.

As Max's lanterns filled the warehouse with a dull glow, I took more of a look around. Trash and what appeared to be old clothes littered the floor, giving off an unpleasant, mildewy smell. The area where Max was setting up the lanterns had been swept clean of debris. I tried to distract myself by attempting to make out some of the graffiti that covered the walls until Max walked back toward us.

"You ready?" Max asked Lucy, who was huddling next to me looking terrified.

"B-but, it's only 6:00," Lucy stammered.

Max shrugged. "Better safe than sorry."

I put my arm around Lucy's shoulders, acting calmer than I felt, and walked her to a metal-framed folding chair that Max had placed in the center of the lanterns. Jason approached with the chains and cuffs.

Jason faced Lucy. "Go ahead and sit down," he told her.

Lucy slowly sat on the black canvas seat of the rickety metal chair, then looked up at Jason with huge, terrified eyes. "What next?"

"Hold out your hands." Jason set the chains and cuffs on the cement floor and demonstrated by holding his hands in front of him, wrists side by side. Lucy slowly complied, but was trembling so badly that she could barely hold her wrists together.

Jason picked up one set of cuffs and knelt by Lucy. He gingerly cuffed her hands together, running the cuff on her right hand through a link of the chain before locking the cuff down. He then put the second pair of cuffs around her ankles and attached the other end of the chain, kind of hog-tying her. Then, using a big padlock, he attached the loose ends of chain to a metal loop coming out of the concrete ground. I hadn't noticed the loop before, and wondered what its original purpose was. Finished, Jason backed away to survey his handiwork.

"Is that it?" I asked. "It doesn't seem very . . . restraining."

Jason turned his attention to me. "It will be when she's in wolf form. She'll be a lot bigger than she is now. We don't want the chains to hurt her when she changes."

Oh, well that made sense . . . I guess.

Lucy watched us with big, terrified eyes. I went and sat on the bare concrete beside her, taking her hand in mine. The cold from the ground seeped into my body. Everybody else sat in a semicircle in front of us.

"How did you know Dan was crazy?" I asked, turning to Max.

He gave me a confused look.

I elaborated, "In my room, you said you tried to get to know Dan and you realized he was crazy. How'd you know?"

Max hesitated. "Um, you know, just by the kind of things he talked about . . . "

I fixed him with a stubborn stare, crossed my arms, and raised my eyebrows, urging him on.

"He told me to stay away from Lucy, because she was his. He told me I could have Allison if I wanted." Max paused at an 'as if' noise from Allison.

"What about me?" I interjected.

That confused look crossed Max's face again.

"What?" I asked snarkily. "You said that Dan claimed Lucy and you could have Allison, what am I, chopped liver?"

Jason chimed in with a smirk on his face, “You're mad that no one claimed you as property?”

I gave him a petulant look. “It’s the principle of the thing.” I turned back toward Max. “Well?”

“He didn’t include you because you can’t be turned,” Max replied.

Now it was my turn for the confused expression.

Max went on, “Only humans can be turned.”

Jason gave Max a sharp look. I looked back and forth between Max and Jason, trying to understand the warning look on Jason’s face and the confused one on Max’s.

“She doesn’t know,” Jason said softly.

“Oh,” Max murmured. “Sorry.”

“Ok, someone needs to tell me what’s going on here,” I interrupted.

“I don't think you want to know,” Jason said softly.

“Try me.”

Jason turned to me, looking resigned, he explained, “Supernatural beings are usually equipped with a way to tell their own. To a werewolf, humans have a certain smell, and anything not human will smell different. They may not be able to decipher what type of being you are, but they can tell if you aren’t human. You don't smell human.”

I gave him a smug look, despite my sudden loss of breath. I managed to suck in enough air to reply, “Of course I’m human, my mom’s human, and as far as I know I’ve never been bitten by any sort of supernatural beastie.”

“You never knew your dad,” Allison countered, catching on to what was being implied. “Your mom’s human, but you have no idea what your dad could’ve been.”

“For someone who was still skeptical about the werewolf thing, you seem all too ready to believe that my dad was some sort of . . . non-human,” I shot back.

Allison frowned. “Just think about it, Xoe.”

The superior look faded from my face. “But . . . I’m sure my mom would have known if my dad had been less than human, and if she knew, she would have told me.” It sounded a weak defense, even to me.

“Would you have ever guessed that Max wasn’t human?” Allison asked quietly.

A stab of fear entered my heart. “No, but I don’t really know Max.My mom *knew* my dad. He *had* to have been human,” I said in a last ditch effort to prove them wrong.

Jason wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I am sorry Xoe, but . . . your smell begs to differ.”

“Well, then . . . what am I?” I asked no one in particular.

Max shrugged. “Not sure, it’s not a smell I know.”

We all sat in silence. If my mind wasn’t already spinning, it sure was now. I had just begun to accept the idea that supernatural beings existed. Now I was supposed to believe that I was one?

“So that’s it?” I asked, frustrated. “You tell me that I’m not human and have no explanation other than that I smell funny?”

Jason shifted to sit in a more comfortable position. “Has anything strange ever happened to you, or have you ever been able to do something you should not have been able to do?”

“Not that I know of,” I answered hesitantly.

“Then there is no way to tell,” Jason stated. “You may simply go on like a regular human.”

“Is there any reason why I wouldn’t?” I asked. “I mean, if I was going to exhibit any non-human traits, wouldn’t I have done so by now?”

“Not necessarily,” Jason answered. “Mixing human bloodlines with supernatural is a *roll-of-the-dice* process. There is no way of telling what might happen. Humans have dominant and recessive traits. The supernatural traits are no different from the others. They may be recessive to the human ones . . . or the supernatural traits may only reveal themselves with time.”

“Oh,” I answered. What else could I say?

“What time is it now?” Lucy asked the room anxiously. I wanted Jason to continue his explanation, but I couldn't blame Lucy for changing the subject. I'd just have to ask him later.

Max glanced at his watch. “6:25.”

Lucy cringed. “When did you say it was going to happen again . . . the *change*?”

Max watched Lucy worriedly. “Around full dark, it’s not exactly precise. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Lucy was silent for a moment, then asked hesitantly, “Will it hurt?”

Max smiled sadly. “Do you want the truth?”

Lucy seemed to think about it, then nodded her head slowly, as if she might regret learning the answer.

“Yes,” Max replied, “it hurts.”

Lucy nodded her head somberly. I squeezed her hand, and we settled in to wait.

Only a few minutes had gone by when a horrible thought dawned on me, and my mouth went dry with fear. I turned toward Max. “Um, aren’t *you* supposed to be turning into a werewolf tonight too?”

Max smiled. “I can control it. I have to turn each month, but I can do it any of the three days that the moon is at its fullest.”

Allison looked green. “Are you sure?” she asked.

Max nodded, perfectly at ease. We had no choice but to take him for his word and hope that it held true. Well, that, or kick him out the bay door, but that would be just plain rude.

The next hour went by incredibly slow. My mind was completely preoccupied with the idea that I might not be human. Conversation was kept to a minimum, not by choice, but what do you say when you just found out you might not be human, all while waiting for your friend to turn into a wolf? It was almost 8:00. There was no light left outside to shine through the bottom of the bay door where it met the ground.

Suddenly Lucy started to whimper. “Something’s happening,” she spat through gritted teeth.

I let go of Lucy’s hand and stood. Jason ran to his medical kit and started filling a syringe. Lucy’s knuckles were white as her hands curled into tight fists. Sweat began to bead on her brow. Jason came running with the syringe and unceremoniously stuck her in the arm.

Lucy panted heavily, her eyes half closed. Then the screaming started.

Jason came up behind Lucy and quickly tied a thick piece of cloth around her mouth to dull the noise of her screams. It didn’t help much. We just had to hope that no one was in hearing range of us. Loud popping noises emanated from her limbs and there was a sickening tearing sound coming from somewhere in her body. Her skin began to ripple like something alive swam underneath. Her bones pulled apart at the joints under her skin. Her body twisted and reshaped as her form started to look more wolf than human.

Harsh reality set in. It was real. It was all real. Werewolves and who knew what else . . . existed. I was frozen with terror as I watched Lucy change. Fur erupted all over her mostly wolf body. It was like freeze frame animation, every time I blinked, the picture changed.

A few heart-pounding minutes later, Lucy’s screams were cut off into a guttural howl. My limbs unlocked and I ran to a corner and threw up. Hot tears stung my eyes as I crouched in the corner, not wanting to look back to the thing that was formerly Lucy.

When I had regained enough composure to turn back to the scene, a giant wolf had taken Lucy’s place. It was growling and thrashing around, trying to free itself from its bonds. The warped chair was lying several feet away from the wolf. Large gleaming teeth snapped at empty air as the wolf strained against the chains. The gag had fallen to the floor. The wolf’s fur was the same black as Lucy’s hair.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The wolf continued to thrash and snap at the air. Jason herded us away, back toward his car. “She’ll be like this the rest of the night. I’ll stay with her. Max can take you guys home,” Jason stated, annoyingly calm.

“Will she be like this every month?” Allison asked breathlessly. Her eyes were too wide and I half expected her to bolt out of the building at any second.

“No,” Max answered, his hand on Allison’s arm, offering comfort. “She’ll slowly gain control of herself in wolf form. Once she’s a little less dangerous, I’ll take her to shift in the woods. Eventually she’ll be able to go out on her own and not risk eating any humans.”

“How long?” I asked.

“I don’t really know,” Max replied. “The only experience I have to go on is my own. It took me about five months, five shifts. Those first few months . . . I don’t really remember much of what happened . . . ”

Max’s far-away gaze made him look like a lost little boy. I realized that I knew barely anything about Max. I had always just kind of . . . overlooked him. He had gone through everything that Lucy had, but he had been completely by himself. Until now, he had lived in a world where no one was like him—alone. I felt a wash of love and gratitude for my friends. With them I would never feel that lonely. I needed to stop taking that for granted.

I shifted my attention to Allison as she nodded, numbly accepting Max’s answer, then slid into the backseat of Jason’s car.

“I’m staying,” I stated matter-of-factly. “My mom thinks I’m at Lucy’s and I’m not leaving her. She’ll be scared when she turns back.”

Jason looked unsure, but finally nodded his assent. Allison stayed staring blankly in the backseat, looking pale. I put Allison’s seatbelt on her without her really noticing, then grabbed a piece of gum from her purse while I was at it to get rid of the taste of vomit in my mouth. I gave Allison one final worried look, then shut the car door.

After Max and Allison drove away, Jason and I sat cross-legged on the floor, a safe distance from Lucy. Jason had taken a brown leather aviator jacket out of his car before Max drove away. I had assumed it was for him, but as we sat down he draped it over my shoulders. I was

freezing, so I didn't argue. I put my arms through the sleeves and wrapped the jacket close around me. His jacket smelled like him, the scent smelled like a pleasant mixture of trees and vanilla. The cold didn't seem to faze him.

I was the first to break the silence. "Tell me more about werewolves."

He looked up at me, his face half in shadow. "Max would really be the one to ask. I have already told you most of what I know: they must turn once a month, but once they gain control they are able to change at will; they have superhuman strength, even in human form; they are not much stronger than humans in the beginning, but the strength grows as time goes on; and they are very hard to kill, depending on how powerful they are. Like I said, silver only works on newer werewolves."

The strength thing was new information to me. I cocked my head, thinking. "So how do you kill an experienced werewolf?"

"It is no easy task," he replied. "Brute force is the best method. The older the wolf, the more quickly it will regenerate. You literally have to tear them limb from limb."

I suddenly felt queasy again. "So a human wouldn't be able to kill one?"

Jason shook his head. "It has been done before, though it's usually a group of humans. One human would stand no chance, unless they were very lucky."

I nodded, my fear of Dan now increased ten-fold. I still had one more question that had been eating at me all day. Okay, more like three. "How did you just happen to show up in town shortly after Dan did, and how did you know to be on the trail when he attacked me and Lucy, and how do you know about werewolves?" I kept my eyes focused steadily on Jason, trying to keep myself distracted from the all too real wolf salivating across the room.

Jason ran his hand through his hair, then returned it to his knee. I was beginning to understand that it was his nervous gesture, the 'tell' that gave him away. He took in a deep breath. "I've been following Dan."

"Why?" I prodded. I realized that I had scooted a little too near Jason in anticipation of his answer. His face was very close. I felt a blush heat my face, but held my ground.

Jason either was comfortable with the closeness, or else he didn't notice. "Most werewolves are able to fit into society. They form packs for protection and do their best to play human. Dan was a member of a pack, but then he attacked and killed a human. Pack law states that if any wolf kills a human, that wolf will be executed. Dan fled. His pack hired me to follow him. Once he entered an area with a local

pack, I was to report to them and they would handle the execution. Dan has been very careful so far. Shelby does not have a local pack, so I was keeping an eye on him until he moved on."

I thought about what he'd said for a moment. "Why can't you just, you know, *take care of it*?"

He laughed and drew a little closer to me. "Trust me, I have considered it. First of all, it would be a close fight, Dan is very strong. Secondly, the wolves tend to keep these things within their society. I was only hired to follow him."

I asked, "So you're like a bounty hunter?"

The side of his mouth raised in a crooked smile. "Something like that."

Hmm, a real live bounty hunter. I tried to hide my morbid excitement. "So, if werewolves stay in packs, then why is Max in Shelby, where there is no pack?"

Jason answered, "I have not asked him his story. He apparently changed on his own, so I would guess that he was attacked by a rogue wolf. It is rare for someone like that to not only survive the attack and the change, but to also not massacre his loved ones, but it happens.Any more questions?"

"Yes," I replied. "Who . . . or what, are you, and how did you become involved in all of this?"

He pursed his lips. "That I will explain when this night is over, and you are not trapped alone in a dark room with me and a bloodthirsty wolf."

Ominous . . . very ominous. "Tomorrow?"

He sighed, then looked down and nodded his head. "Tomorrow."

Jason looked over at Lucy and my eyes followed his. She had calmed down, and had now resorted to staring at us hungrily. It was hard to think of the wolf as my best friend. Usually best friends didn't want to eat you. She kept her eyes on us, ears forward and alert.

"Max is back," Jason stated.

The bay door lifted and Max called in that it was him, confirming what Jason had said, then drove Jason's car through, casting bouncing shapes across the rubble against the walls of the warehouse with the headlights.

"Is Allison okay?" I called as Max stepped out of the car.

"She's adjusting, I think. It's a lot to take in." Max said as he went to close the bay door. After an echoing clang, Max walked to where we were sitting and plunked down beside Jason. He turned to me. "There're some blankets in the back seat if you want to get some rest, Xoe."

Come to think of it, I was *exhausted*. Max looked as annoyingly wide-awake as ever. I nodded and got up.

Crawling into the backseat of the car, I found several blankets and a pillow waiting for me. Bonus points for Max, or Jason, depending on who had supplied me with the bedding.I considered giving Jason back his jacket, which was still wrapped around me, but greedily snuggled up with it.I awkwardly curled my legs up on the seat. Believe it or not, there are some downsides to being tall. I fell asleep about 30 seconds after my head hit the pillow.

I had nightmares of werewolves, vampires, and my dad, who I somehow just knew was my dad, even though I've never seen him, turning into a gargantuan monster and telling me I'd grow up to be just like him.

I woke to Jason gently shaking my shoulders. "Lucy's starting to change back," he informed me. He looked at me worriedly and placed his hand against my neck. "You have a fever."

I blinked at him, momentarily confused, and mumbled, "I'm fine, it's nothing. I need to see Lucy."

I scooted out of the car in a hurry, but was instantly stopped by Max. He grabbed my arm to keep me from rushing to Lucy and pulled one of the blankets out of the car. He blushed, handing me the dark gray blanket, and said "She's not going to, um, have any clothes when she changes back."

"Oh," I replied, clutching the blanket in both hands, "er, thanks."

I gathered up the blanket so it wouldn't drag on the floor and started walking to Lucy. I spared a glance back to Jason and Max, who were standing dutifully by the car with their backs turned to Lucy and me. I wished I could wait with them. I wondered if Lucy was going to be different, more like Dan. I hoped not.

Lucy was almost back to human form by the time I reached her. She was lying on her side on the concrete, still in chains. Her body was back to normal, but her face was still . . . wrong. It was hard to tell what was wrong about it, it just was. She was panting and whimpering softly. I watched her worriedly, feeling sick again.

I couldn't make sense of the change, but her face slowly shifted back to normal. I wrapped the blanket around her, snuggling it up around her neck. Tears streamed down her delicate face as I called Jason over to unlock her chains. After letting the chains fall to the floor, Jason gently lifted Lucy in his arms. She was mostly covered by the blanket, only her bare feet and a few locks of her long black hair were visible. He carried her to the car, placing her in the back seat.

I followed them and slid into the backseat beside Lucy, comforting her while Jason and Max loaded everything back into the trunk. She laid her head in my lap and I stroked her hair while she cried silent, tired tears. With a slam of the trunk, Jason and Max walked to the front of the car. I looked down at Lucy and realized that she'd fallen

asleep in my lap.

Jason slid into the driver's seat as Max took the front seat next to him. Neither looked back at Lucy and me. Jason started the car, lighting up the clock on the dash. I spared a glance at it, 6:27 am. We were *so* not making school today. I put my seatbelt on and awkwardly wrapped the middle seatbelt around Lucy's waist, snapping it in place.

I directed Jason as he drove us to Lucy's empty house. The warmth of the sun from the window pulsed against my skin. I propped Lucy up so I could take off Jason's jacket. Lucy was still unconscious, her limbs limp like those of a corpse. Jason pulled into the circular gravel driveway and shut off the car. He got out and opened the door to the backseat while Max took Lucy's keys to unlock the front door. Jason gently lifted Lucy out of the car and carried her inside with me tagging along behind him.

I flipped on the lights as I walked through the doorway, then led everyone into the living room so that Jason could place the still unconscious Lucy gently on the pale beige couch. Everything about Lucy's house is very . . . beige. It was a stark contrast to the colorful chaos that I was used to.

We stood in the silence of the dark, nondescript living room until Max said, "She'll be out for a while, TV?"

I grabbed the remote from the plain oak coffee table, turning the TV on as I sat down next to Max on the loveseat. Jason had sat down by Lucy's feet on the couch. I flipped through the channels, finally settling on *Teen Wolf* the movie. Seemed fitting.

As we watched, I quizzed Max on the similarities between the movie and real werewolves. He seemed more than happy to talk about it. He chattered away while I half-listened to him. Jason appeared to be deep in thought, not watching the movie or listening to Max. I settled back on the loveseat and prepared to wait. Eventually Max ran out of material. After all, everything he knew about werewolves was what he had learned from personal experience, and I turned my focus back to the movie.

When the movie ended, I pushed the *guide* button on the remote. Apparently there exists a second *Teen Wolf* movie, titled *Teen Wolf Too*, which was playing after the first one. Lucy was still out cold, so we decided to watch that one too. Eventually I curled up against the arm of the loveseat and let my eyes drift closed. My sleep was never restful when I had my fever-inducing dreams, so I still felt exhausted.

I woke up to Max reaching across me to retrieve the remote. The credits were rolling on *Teen Wolf Too,* and Max quickly changed the channel to a soccer game. I looked at Jason to find him watching me, worry creasing his brow. Jason caught my eyes with his, then nodded to the backdoor. Interpreting his signal, I followed him out, leaving

Max to watch Lucy.

"I guess I can tell you what you want to know now," Jason said with a sigh as I shut the backdoor behind us. "Dan is still in town, so the situation is far from over, but at least now you have a choice of whether or not you want to be around me." He walked further through the grass to sit on a small iron bench near the white fence that surrounded Lucy's backyard. A large oak tree shaded the bench, its branches reaching hungrily toward the sun. He gestured for me to sit beside him. Sitting down, I watched him expectantly.

"I'm what popular culture would view as a vampire," he said.

I blinked slowly at him. "Come again?"

Instead of repeating himself, he looked down at his lap while I processed his answer.

"Well I guess that makes sense." I said after a few moments of silence.

He looked up as a stunned expression crossed his face. "You're not shocked? Horrified?"

I smirked. "You're talking to someone who found out that werewolves exist, had her best friend turned into a werewolf, not to mention finding out that I'm apparently not human, all in the last few days. Forgive me if I do not display the proper amount of awe. As for the horrified part, that all depends on my next few questions." On the inside I was shaking, but it wasn't time to break down. Not yet.

He looked at me, slightly confused, as if he could see right through to my soul. It was all too reminiscent of Dan's looks during English. "Go on," he prompted me, anxiety creeping into his normally controlled voice.

"Do you drink blood?" I asked.

He nodded. "I only drink animal blood now, or human blood from blood banks when I can manage it."

I hesitated on the *now*. "But you at one time drank directly from humans?"

He nodded again.

I continued. "So . . . you've killed people?"

He looked at the ground, then answered me while focusing on the grass at our feet. "That was a long time ago. My bloodlust used to be much more difficult to control. I felt remorse for those I killed, but I could not stop."

My pulse sped, and I had to resist the overwhelming urge to scoot away from him. "So what changed?" I asked softly.

Jason answered, very carefully avoiding my eyes, "One night, a child became my prey. He was alone, walking to his home at night. He must have only been seven or eight years old. I followed him, at war with myself . . . a war I always lost. It became too much, I approached

him and knocked him to the ground. I was poised to go for his throat. Then I saw the look on his face. He seemed so shocked that someone would hurt him. He looked at me, not understanding what I intended, and I was somehow able to stop. That had never happened before. Until then, once I had spotted my prey, I would try to resist, but then my conscience would turn off, my mind would become entirely consumed by the hunt. After that night, I was able to stop it, I do not know why. Once I had a choice, I began to feed only on animals or on blood from humans after they had donated it." He paused, staring at the ground. "Does that change things for you?" At my puzzled look he added, "Does it cause you think less of me?"

Ooh, tricky. I thought for a moment, staring off into space while trying to ignore the sick feeling in my gut, then turned to find him staring at me intently, blue eyes unblinking. "I don't know," I answered. "I'll need some time to think about it."

He looked back down and nodded, resigned.

"Okay, next question, how are you out in the sun?" I asked.

He laughed a slightly bitter laugh. "It is a myth that we burn in the sun. The sun hurts my eyes, and my vision is slightly less during the day. I suppose it is because of my increased night-vision."

I nodded. "How old are you?" I asked.

"I was born in 1883," He smiled. "Anything else?"

I gulped. That made him . . . old. I took a deep breath and let it out. "I thought you talked kind of funny."

He smiled and tentatively took my hand. He was being honest with me, so I let him. He gripped a little harder. "Your hand is trembling."

Damn, and here I though I was acting all cool and collected. "So maybe I am a *little* shocked by the vampire thing," I mumbled.

He said nothing, but kept his hand in mine.

I was reminded of a question I had meant to ask him last night. "Where are you staying while you're here?"

"I'm currently residing at the *Holiday Inn* in town."

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"What?" he asked.

"The *Holiday Inn*, it just seems so . . . normal."

"Would you rather I was staying at the local crypt perhaps? Or possibly you know of a cozy bat infested cave nearby?"

Grinning, I answered, "At the very least you could have chosen a creepy abandoned building or something."

"I may be a *creature of the night,"* he wiggled the fingers of his free hand in the air in mock spookiness, "but I happen to enjoy running water and electricity."

I snapped my fingers in an *aw shucks* gesture and said mournfully, "You've shattered all of my illusions."

Jason laughed, but quickly took on a more somber tone. “I can track Dan on my own, leave you alone, but it would be safer if I stayed with you and Lucy.”

I took me a moment to realize that he expected an answer.“Oh, stay, of course you should stay with us.”

I sensed relief in his smile. I wasn’t sure why that surprised me.

“Lucy’s up!” a call came from the house.

I leapt up and went running inside with Jason following shortly behind me. Lucy was sitting up on the couch with her blanket wrapped tightly around her.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her.

She looked up to me. “Ok, I guess. My throat is killing me, from the screaming Max tells me. Other than that, I’m just tired.”

I sat beside her and put my arm around her shoulders. “Do you remember anything?” I asked.

“Not really,” she replied. “I remember arriving at the warehouse, then I remember this morning, changing back. I didn’t hurt anyone, did I? Where’s Al?” She looked from me to Max.

“No, you didn’t hurt anyone,” I assured her. “Max took Allison home after you changed. She was a little shaken up.” I didn’t feel the need to mention that I had been rather shaken myself.

Lucy looked down at her lap. “So, what now?”

“We still have Dan to worry about,” Jason answered. “He’s going to come for you at some point, and we need to be ready when he does.”

Jason carefully avoided my eyes. Lucy looked back and forth between us, picking up on the awkwardness. Our banter seemed to have only temporarily softened the fact that I was unsure if I could deal with his past.

“My parents are coming home tonight. They won’t let us all stay here.” Lucy stated. She looked up at me expectantly.

“My mom will let you stay at my place, but we’ll have to sneak the boys in. Has anyone talked to Al yet?” I asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

“We’ll call her from my house. I need to get there and delete the message I’m sure the school has left because of my absence before my mom gets home.”

Lucy’s eyes widened and Max added, “They already called here, message successfully erased.”

Lucy let out a relieved breath. “Thanks.” She wrapped the blanket tightly around herself, then went upstairs to pack her stuff, walking a little unsteadily. As she left she said, “I’ll tell my parents we have to stay up late to finish a school project, so I need to stay at your place. It’ll work at least for tonight . . . I hope.”

“Fingers crossed,” I said.

Lucy paused on the stairs with a sour expression on her face. “Do you guys mind waiting while I take a quick shower?”

“No, I was going to recommend that,” I answered with a smile.

“Gee Xoe, you have such a way with words,” Lucy said as she turned to continue up the stairs.

While we waited for Lucy to shower, I worried over Lucy’s new *affliction*. I also worried about the vampire sitting next to me on the sofa and the werewolf lounging on the love seat. Not to mention that tonight I had to sneak said vampire and werewolf into my house while we waited to be attacked by another werewolf.

Since when was being a teenager so complicated?

Don’t answer that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As soon as we arrived at my house, I got out of the car and unlocked the front door. Jason and Max went in first to make sure nothing was amiss around the house. I checked the messages and erased the one from the school. The other message was from Allison, saying to call her as soon as I got home. I picked up the phone and dialed her number.

Allison answered after the first ring. “What took you so long!” she exclaimed. “I have been waiting here for hours for you to tell me what’s going on!”

I laughed. “Calm down Al. Everyone’s okay. We’re back at my house now.”

“I’ll see you in ten,” she said, then hung up.

I placed the phone back in its cradle just as Max and Jason returned to the living room. Lucy was curled up on the couch, staring at nothing.

“I’m in desperate need of a shower,” I announced to the room. I looked toward Max and Jason, “You guys are free to use the guest bathroom if you want. There should be plenty of hot water.”

Max shrugged, “I don’t have any extra clothes. I’ll probably just run home and shower.” He turned to Jason. “Mind if I use your car?”

“It is all yours,” Jason answered. “I have clothes in the trunk that I need to grab, then you can take it.”

“It’s settled then,” I concluded. I informed Jason where the guest bathroom was, then ran upstairs and hopped in the shower.

Finally alone, I took a moment to process the events of the previous night and that morning. It was a lot to take in: werewolves, vampires, and whatever I was. That last part was by far the most troubling to me, not that the others were unimportant, far from it. My world was completely and utterly upside-down.

I thought about Jason being a vampire. I wasn’t even really sure about what a vampire was. I mean, I had the movies and legends to go on, but how many of them were actually based on reality? All I knew for sure was that he drank blood, and despite popular belief, could go out in the sun.

Vampires, as a general consensus, were reanimated corpses. Jason

had said when he was born, but not when or if he died. Maybe you were just born a vampire, not changed into one.

Then there was Jason's profession. Bounty hunter? I guess that was actually my choice of words, but still. His contract against Dan seemed valiant enough, but what if his other jobs weren't quite as innocent? I wished I had thought of all of these questions earlier.

I finished showering and dried off. Then I went rummaging through my closet and pulled on a clean pair of jeans. I considered a turtleneck and vetoed the idea; I wasn't sure if Jason would think it was because of him and be offended. I decided on a plain black, v-neck short-sleeved shirt then headed back to the group. As I neared the end of the stairs, Jason turned his head to watch me for the rest of my descent.

His observant blue eyes had a hint of some emotion that I didn't understand, except that it made my heart hurt in a funny way. It seemed an admiring gaze, but there was some sadness underneath. He was freshly showered and wearing a blue cotton t-shirt that matched his eyes on top of jeans and his usual hiking boots.

Walking into the room I saw that Lucy was pretending to watch the soccer game with Max, who had apparently already gone home and showered, since he was now wearing a yellow button up shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, and some more khaki cargo pants. I knew I had taken a long time in the shower, but I hadn't realized just *how* long. Noticing my presence, Max and Lucy both turned to add their gazes to Jason's.

I cut the silence by asking, "Anyone hungry?"

The atmosphere eased as everyone admitted that they were starved. We all trooped to the kitchen. I searched my usually empty pantry as everyone else went to sit in the adjoining dining room. Like I said, we're big on take-out in my house, so I was surprised to find we had all of the ingredients for pancakes. Mom must have gone shopping. I had retrieved a big blue ceramic mixing bowl and had begun mixing the batter when the doorbell rang.

"That'll be Allison," I called. "I'll get it." I went into the living room and opened the door. I was surprised to find not Allison, but Brian waiting outside. He was dressed in a red t-shirt and jeans, topped by his Letterman's jacket.

"So you *are* alive!" he exclaimed. I stared blankly at him and he went on, "Well what was I supposed to think? There was that scene in English yesterday with that weirdo Dan. And you, him, and the other new guy that sat behind you obviously had some tension going on, then today none of you are there, and I didn't see Allison in gym either."

Jason chose that moment to walk up and stand behind me, almost

touching. I could feel the line of his chest a hair's-breadth away from my back. The look Brian gave him was not a friendly one. Ignoring Brian's glare, Jason stepped closer. Now he actually was pressed against my back. I shivered, sensing the tension in Jason's body.

Brian tried to stare down Jason, but then seemed to think better of it, and gave his usual grin, if not an entirely happy one. He turned his gaze back to me. "Do I smell pancakes?" he asked mischievously. He didn't wait for an answer. I stood there dumbly as he pushed his way through the door with a very deliberate look at Jason. As Brian walked past us, I turned to Jason for help, but was only rewarded with a sarcastic 'nice going' look. He'd been trying to intimidate Brian in to leaving, and I'd totally blown it.

I crossed my arms with an angry pout, then headed back into the kitchen. Jason shut and locked the door, then followed me.

Max had started cooking the pancakes while I was gone on my rarely used electric griddle. I made a mental note to start using it more. It really was a genius invention. No stove required and clean up consisted of wiping it down with a paper towel. Max had placed the first of the pancakes onto a platter he had to have found shoved in the back of one of our barren cupboards. Leaving Max to his work, I peeked into the dining room to see Lucy and Brian sitting at opposite ends of my pale wood table.

Shaking my head, I started the coffee while Jason hovered over me. I ground the beans, fresh ground is the only way to go, and put them in the paper filter. Jason remained standing in the kitchen, watching me as I grabbed some paper plates, coffee mugs, and juice for the non-coffee drinkers. So it was well past lunchtime, I simply could not have pancakes without coffee.

Jason darted occasional glances at the table where Brian was sitting, while he continued to hover over me almost possessively. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Jason was jealous. Well, considering I'd only known him a few days, I really didn't know any better. Not knowing whether to be flattered, or annoyed, I settled on a little bit of both, and tried to ignore Jason as much as possible.

I finished setting the table as Max set the heaping platter of pancakes in the center. I brought out the coffee pot and sat down. Jason and I were the only ones to fill our cups. Point for the vampire. I added cream, no sugar. Jason took his black.

Another knock on the door signaled Allison's arrival. Max got up to let her in. The rest of us sat eating our pancakes, Jason and I on one side of the table, Brian on the other, and Lucy at the head of the table. Allison waltzed in ahead of Max, wearing a lavender tunic-style tank top over skinny jeans and black ballet flats. She tossed her black and silver overnight bag on the floor in a corner of the dining room, then

sat down next to Brian as Max sat on the other side of Jason.

Jason heaped more pancakes onto his plate. I didn't think vampires could eat people food, or drink coffee for that matter. Another myth I guess, I'd have to ask later. He drizzled maple syrup over his pile of pancakes and dug in. Allison gave me a questioning look at the sight of Brian and I mouthed, "Later."

"So, this is quite a gathering," Brian observed innocently, albeit a little sarcastically. "What have you all got planned this evening?"

We each darted nervous glances at our co-conspirators.

"School project," Lucy answered.

Brian smiled. "School project? What class do you all have together?"

In an attempt to save our ruse Allison answered, "They're helping me with a project for the yearbook committee."

Brian's look remained suspicious, but the questioning ended . . . for now.

Allison took the opportunity to change the subject. "Who made the pancakes?"

Max raised his hand with a grin.

Allison laughed and ran her hand through her loose, blonde hair. "Surprise, surprise, Xoe passes the cooking off on someone else."

"Hey!" I shouted playfully. "I mixed. That's cooking."

Allison jested, "Oooooh, she uses a spoon."

I pouted, glaring at Al, as everyone laughed. I wasn't actually upset. My cooking skills were often mocked. Plus, I kind of had it coming. I gave Al a hard time about one thing or another most every day.

After we finished eating, I hustled Brian out of the house, saying we had to get started on our "project." I walked him to the door, but before walking out he turned to me. "I don't trust Jason. If you need anything, call."

Ah, the testosterone was suffocating. I said goodbye and shut the door to find Jason watching me from across the room.

He walked up to me, hands in his pockets, acting perfectly at ease. "Boyfriend?" he questioned.

"No, not that it's any of your business," I sniffed, then walked to the dining room where everyone else was still sitting. I sat down as Jason came into the room, a small, satisfied smile on his face.

Jason took the chair beside me and put his arm across my chair back casually, then started detailing the battle plan for that night. I leaned forward slightly so that I wouldn't be touching Jason's arm. What was with all of the hovering? I decided to write it off as Jason just being a touchy-feely kind of person. So why did my heart speed every time such touching occurred?

Jason caught my gaze with his midnight blue eyes. “If Dan shows up, Xoe, you, Lucy, and Allison need to get to Allison’s car, lock yourselves inside and start driving. Don’t stop until I call you on Allison’s cell to let you know it’s safe to come back.”

I felt an instant flush of anger at the fact that he wanted us to run. I managed to keep my cool, and leaned my back against his arm. Rather than voicing that I refused to run, I pointed out the other flaw in the plan. “What about my mom?”

Jason grimaced. “Sorry Xoe, forgot about that.” He paused to think for a moment. “Okay, you can tell your mom that Dan is a burglar, then you can all get out of the house together. We just can’t let your mom call the cops.”

I nodded. “That will probably work. My mom is *so* not good in emergency situations, so she’ll likely do whatever we tell her.” I blew out a sigh. We’d have to worry about her inevitable questions later. Okay, so it was a flawed plan . . . better than nothing.

Jason smiled and removed his arm from my chair. “It’s settled then.”

I’m sure that Jason meant that we should still run, but all he had said was to “get out of the house.” Now that, I could do. I nodded my final assent to the plan.

Shortly after we had settled what we would do, my mom came home, dressed in a navy business suit and heels; must have been an office day. Taking in the group of us, she looked at me with a smile and hands on her hips, waiting for an explanation.

“School project,” I told her.

“Pizza!” she exclaimed, disappearing into the living room to order.

Max looked at me, bewildered. “Your mom is *so* cool.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I’d say she’s a keeper.”

We all headed up to my room, telling my mom we were going to work on our project. Al and Max sat side by side on my bed, while the rest of us settled into a semi-circle on my plush beige carpeting.

Now that we had nothing to do but wait, we got a conversation going about school, of all things. While we talked, Jason got up and walked around my room, looking at pictures and any trinkets I had on my dresser.

I watched him as he picked up a picture my mom had taken of me on a camping trip. I was nine, and even more gangly looking than I am now. I was posing with a marshmallow on a stick, my mouth way more open than it needed to be. He smiled, not noticing my gaze. I quickly turned my attention back to the conversation, but of course, my mind wandered. I couldn’t imagine Jason as a savage killer, but he was, at least at one time. I wasn’t sure how much that bothered me.

After a while my mom knocked on the door. Not waiting for an

answer, she came in carrying several pizza boxes. She handed me a stack of paper plates to pass out as Max and Al came to join us on the floor. My mom set the boxes on the carpet in between us all.

Being a mom, and having an obligation to embarrass me, she sat down next to Jason and folded her short, now jean-clad legs underneath her, then she began quizzing Max and Jason. I sat back down on Jason's other side with a sigh. Jason watched the embarrassment grow on my face, smiling, and answered all of my mom's inane questions politely. I kept my eyes on my pizza, trying not to frown.

At one point my mom pulled her pale blue tank top straight, going into business mode, and asked to see our school project. We told her we were still in the "brainstorming stage" and she let it go. Forty-five excruciating minutes later, she decided that her embarrassing mom requirement for the week had been achieved. She grabbed the empty pizza boxes and left us to "get back to work."

When conversation began to run out, the topic came to me and the whole "non-human" thing.

"So what are the possibilities?" Allison asked Jason.

Jason glanced at me, then answered, "There are many supernatural creatures that can produce offspring with humans, some more rare than others. Many people have elven blood without even knowing it. Full blooded elves are extremely rare these days, mainly because their bloodlines have become almost completely entwined with humans."

"Could that be what I am?" I interrupted hopefully. Elves didn't sound too bad.

Jason shook his head, dashing my hopes. "You may have some elven blood, but Max and I would not be able to smell the difference. Your non-human blood is something much more rare."

I sighed, getting crabby. "Spit it out already."

Jason went on, "One option is Ogres, but I doubt that's what you are, you would likely be much larger. Another one is Merpeople."

"Merpeople?" Allison asked incredulously.

Jason regarded her. "Merpeople have two forms. When under water, they are in their natural form, very similar to the common depiction of mermaids. On land, they look much like humans, except for the second eyelids. For some reason, those remain even in human form."

Okay, Merpeople were slightly more unsettling than elves, but again, not horrible. "What are my chances of that?"

"Pretty good," Jason replied. "Merpeople are a great deal more common than one would think."

I nodded, taking it all in. "Any other options?"

Jason hesitated. He ran his hand through his hair. Not a good sign.

Finally, he spoke. “The last option that I came up with was . . . demons.”

My heart skipped a beat. I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Seriously?”

He nodded and answered, “It’s not as uncommon as you would think. Demons often mate with humans, producing half-demons. Demons can look like humans, as can merpeople and ogres. Your mom probably thought your dad was just a normal guy.”

“What about werewolves?” Lucy chimed in.

Jason shook his head, “We can rule out werewolves, vampires, or any conditions resulting from being cursed. All can produce offspring with humans, but none can pass on their afflictions.”

I held my breath at Jason’s mention of vampires, waiting for Lucy or Allison to question him further on the subject. Surprisingly, they both seemed to take the mention of vampires in stride.

Lucy nodded in response to Jason’s answer. “Well that’s something at least.”

So, I could be an ogre (unlikely), a mermaid (not so bad), or . . . a demon (gulp). That seemingly ever-present feeling of dread had returned to the pit of my stomach ten-fold. Like Lucy said, at least we could rule out werewolf and vampire, which also meant that I had my answer about how Jason became a vampire. Small consolation, that.

As we were finishing that lovely subject, I glanced at the clock. 9:00 pm, time for the boys to “leave.” They were going to leave out the front door and drive Jason’s car to hide it. Then they would walk back to my house, do a perimeter check, and sneak back in through my window. When I asked how they were going to climb in through my second-story window, they both smiled mischievously and walked out of my room. I guess we’d find out.

The boys’ departure was Allison’s queue for girl talk. “So Xoe,” she started, “pray tell, what is going on between you and Jason?” She smiled wickedly at me.

I gave her my best dumbfounded look. “What? Nothing, why do you ask?”

Allison sighed, “Oh, come on. Don’t play dumb, you two are *so* obvious.”

With a sigh of my own, I answered, “Nothing Allison, just friends.”

“And why is that?” she went on. “Is it the whole vampire thing?”

My jaw dropped. How did Allison know?

She smiled. “Max told us.”

That little rat . . . I mean wolf. Well, at least I wasn’t the last to know. “So what if it is the vampire thing?” I replied.

Allison crossed her arms and looked at me as if I were being childish. “Who cares? It’s not like he kills people anymore. He’s one of

the good guys now."

I sighed loudly. "Emphasis on the *now*. The fact still remains that he killed people at one time, and who even said I was interested in him to begin with?"

"Pah-lease, I see the way you watch him," Allison countered. "And there is definitely no mistaking the way he watches you."

At that we all turned to a knock at the window. Apparently the boys had finished their perimeter check. Thankfully, the girl talk could end. I stood and opened the window for them to climb in.

"The way who watches who?" Max asked as he pulled himself in. They really *had* climbed all the way up to my two-story window, though I wasn't sure how. The storm drain maybe?

Really, I was more concerned with how much of our conversation they'd heard. The three of us girls crossed our arms and stared Max down with our best stern faces. He shrugged off our glares and plopped down on my bed as Jason climbed in through the window after him.

Turning my attention away from Max, I asked Jason, "Anything to report?"

He shook his head. "Not much, we caught Dan's scent in a few places around the yard, so he's been here recently, but nothing looked out of place."

I nodded. There was a knock at the door. I quickly hustled the boys into the closet, then yelled, "Come in!"

My mom peeked her head in to see that we were all accounted for and told us goodnight. She closed the door softly, oblivious to our nervous smiles and murmured goodnights.

Since most of us were going on little to no sleep, we decided to sleep in shifts. Allison, Lucy, and I all changed into pajamas, while the boys chose to remain in the clothes they had worn during the day. I chose to wear a dark purple cami with matching purple plaid pajama pants, as opposed to my usual t-shirt and boxers. I refused to admit to myself that I did it because Jason was there.

Allison and Jason had first watch. Lucy and I took the bed, snuggling under my fluffy green comforter. Max was left with an orange sleeping bag on the floor. Jason turned on my desk lamp, then turned off the overhead light. I shut my eyes with a silent wish for normal dreams void of fire, and I was out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I woke up to loud ringing. My alarm clock. That meant it was 6:00 am. When blindly smacking it didn't seem to quell the alarm's desire to annoy me, I ripped the cord out of the wall. I sat up, rubbing my eyes and looked blearily around my room. What were all of these people doing in here? My eyes landed on Jason, who had his hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh at me. Oh yeah, Jason, Max, werewolves, vampires . . . I remembered now. Jason managed to cover his smile, but his eyes still shone with humor.

"Glad to be amusing," I mumbled at him.

I looked around to the other people in my room. Lucy and Allison had managed to ignore my alarm, and were still snuggled in bed with me. Max wasn't so lucky. He struggled out of his sleeping bag and stumbled into the bathroom, shutting the door noisily. I looked back to Jason.

"I'll drive you all to school today," he said.

I nodded sleepily, and got out of bed to find something to wear. Jason watched me as I shuffled through the shirts hanging in my closet, finally settling on a plain, dark gray tee shirt with a faded *Star Wars* logo on the front. I was searching for a clean pair of jeans when Max came back out of the bathroom. He walked toward the window, unlatched it, pushed it open, then hopped, and I mean *hopped*, out of my second-story window. Yeah, I wasn't getting used to this supernatural stuff anytime soon.

Jason spared me a final smile then followed Max's lead. I walked to the window and looked out at the ground. Max and Jason were already out of sight. Too weird.

I returned to the bed and shook Allison and Lucy awake, much to their chagrin. We all took speed-showers and got dressed. A cold gust of wind from the still open window reminded me to throw on my forest-green hoodie, then I watched Allison while she was putting on her make-up. She was dressed in a sea foam green blouse that was kind of draped in the front, I've never known what those types of blouses are called, and a beige mini-skirt with knee high, dark brown leather boots. I asked her if Jason had been the one to keep watch all night.

“Vampires don’t sleep,” was her reply. Ask a silly question.

We went downstairs into the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee maker. My mom had left me half of a pot. I filled my travel mug with as much as it would hold, then went to the pantry to find something for us to eat on the way to school. Looked like it was granola bars for breakfast again. I handed one each to Lucy and Allison and stuffed my own into the front pocket of my hoodie.

We went out the front door to find Jason’s car waiting to take us to school. I snagged the front seat without protest from Lucy and Allison. I could feel them watching and waiting to see how I would interact with Jason. I wanted to stare ga-ga-eyed at him, but wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. Girlfriends . . . can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em. At the moment I was leaning toward without. I contented myself with watching him out of the corner of my eye. He was still in his clothes from the day before, but the t-shirt looked so good on him, that I didn’t really mind. I placed my travel mug into one of the cup-holders and slowly began to unwrap my granola bar, refusing to be the first one to make conversation. Jason put the car in drive, and away we went.

The short drive was spent mostly in silence. I fiddled with the radio, just for something to do, scanning through the few radio stations that come in clearly in Shelby. As soon as we pulled up to the school, Allison and Lucy practically leapt from the car, leaving me alone with Jason. It seemed a planned move, and probably was. Sigh.

“What’s the plan for today?” I asked him.

He turned his attention to me. “I am going to wait around the school and make sure Dan doesn't get to Lucy without me or Max there. I'll pick you all up when you get out.”

“You aren’t coming to class?”

Jason smiled and shook his head. “I am not exactly a student.”

That reminded me of another question I had for him. “How did you manage to register and get into my English class anyways?”

“I mustn’t reveal all my secrets,” he answered, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

I gave him a good-natured smirk, then got out of the car with a smile that I simply could not help.

I went to my first class, and the day went by slowly from there. By lunchtime there was still no sign of Dan. I met up with Allison and Lucy and we sat at our usual table. “Anything to report?” I asked them.

They both gave me mischievous smiles. “We were going to ask you the same question,” said Allison.

I gave them wide eyes.

“What did you and Jason talk about?” Lucy interjected, smiling

from ear to ear.

"We simply discussed the matter at hand, nothing more," I answered with my nose up. My denial did nothing to dampen their knowing smiles. Time for a subject change.

I looked at Lucy. "How are you feeling today? Do you feel any . . . different?"

Lucy thought in silence for a moment, unconsciously straightening her pale purple sweater, then answered, "I don't know. I keep looking for changes, but I feel pretty much the same. Max said that my senses would increase, but I haven't noticed. I guess it just takes time. What about you? Have you come up with any ideas about your 'mysterious origin'?"

I sighed. "Let's not even go there. I haven't had any time to think about it. Even if I did, I don't see how I'd be able to figure anything out on my own."

Allison and Lucy both looked down at the table.

Allison turned her eyes back up to me. "You could always ask your mom. Maybe tell her you want to track down you dad, just to meet him. All you need is his name. We can track him down and ask him ourselves."

I sighed again. "I guess we can try, I doubt my mom will give me his name. She likes to pretend that he never existed. If I would believe it, she'd probably try and tell me that I was a test-tube baby or something. Plus, I'm not really sure I'd *want* to meet him, even if it was just to get answers."

It was my turn to look down at the off-white table. I tried to distract myself by reading the various things that people had carved into the tabletop over the years. I traced my finger over a star that was carved deeply into the wood. Our school was either too cheap to buy new tables, or else they were smart enough to know that the new ones would be carved up within weeks. Curse that teenage angst.

"So what's the plan after school today? Another slumber party?" Allison asked, regaining my attention.

Allison can stay over whenever she feels like it. Her parents don't really place many rules and restrictions on her. She pretty much does whatever she wants.

Glad to have the subject off of me again, I answered, "All I know is that Jason is picking us up after school. He said that he was going to try to find out what Dan is up to, so I guess that will govern what our plan will be."

Lucy looked worried. "I don't think my parents will let me stay away another night, and it's doubtful they will let anyone stay over either."

Hmm, quandary. "I don't know," I said. "We'll figure something

out."

The bell rang. It was time for gym, the one bright spot, besides lunchtime, in my day. Allison and I said goodbye to Lucy then headed to the gymnasium.

According to Mitch the plan for gym today was a *free day*. Free day? What the heck was a free day? Mitch's gym teacher license should have been revoked long ago. Allison was all smiles after Mitch announced that we could do whatever we wanted with our gym period, as long as it was P.E. Related, of course. Allison and I went into the locker room and changed into our gym clothes.

As we left the locker room we were joined by a suspicious looking Brian. He looked down at me with squinted eyes, "You care to elaborate Ma'm?" he asked me as he crossed his arms, looking very detective-like.

I answered snarkily, "What *are* you talking about Brian?"

He continued, "You know what I mean. What were those guys doing at your house yesterday? Did you suddenly decide to expand your circle of friends?"

I nodded, smiling sweetly.

He continued, "No, doubtful, very doubtful. Hmmm, let me guess again. You're involved in a random conspiracy concerning aliens, and that Jason character is a rogue FBI agent out to reveal the truth to the public. Yep, that sounds a lot more likely than Alexondra Meyers trying to make new friends."

Ok, so he obviously was not going to let it go. With a resigned sigh, I explained, "We've been having some trouble with that new guy, Dan, and Jason and Max have been hanging around to make sure that he doesn't bother us, that's all."

Brian looked hurt. "Why didn't you ask me? I *do* live right next door, and I should hope that you trust me more than some guy you've hardly ever spoken to and some guy you just met."

I hadn't considered that when I fabricated my lie. In an effort to soothe his hurt feelings, I lied some more. "Lucy's dating Max, so Max volunteered to watch out for us. Max brought Jason along to help out."

Allison gave me an 'are you crazy?' look. Yeah, so I'm not the greatest liar around. Shouldn't that be a good thing? I just had to hope that Lucy wouldn't find out, or I'd be in for a major lecture.

Brian was not so easily sated, he continued, "Jason seemed awful possessive of you to be just a random friend that Max brought with him. He was practically guarding your heels the whole time I was there."

I was out of lies, so I feigned ignorance instead, "Oh, um, I hadn't noticed."

Brian didn't look like he believed me, but he let it go. I had a feeling that the subject had only been dropped temporarily. Brian grabbed a basketball and looked at me, then nodded toward the unoccupied hoop. Brian and I went to play *one-on-one* while Allison watched.

The rest of the day went by too quickly for my taste. I never thought I'd see the day when I would be reluctant to go home from school. The end of the school day meant that our focus had to go back to werewolf matters.

Allison and I left our last class and headed toward the school entrance to find Lucy waiting just inside the doors, rather than outside like she usually did. I was glad to see that she was being cautious. I linked my arm with hers and the three of us headed to the parking lot to meet our fate.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jason was waiting in the lot for us, sitting casually on the hood of his fancy-schmancy car. He was dressed in black pants, a charcoal colored wool coat, and a dark blue, button up shirt that brought out the deep blue of his eyes. His hair was in tousled disarray, as usual, contrasting with his clean-cut clothes.

Jason smiled a crooked smile as we approached. He hopped to his feet to unlock the driver's side door . . . or so I thought. Instead he walked around to the front passenger side and held the door open, looking at me expectantly.

Huh? "What, am I driving or something?" I asked.

"No, I am." He just stood there smiling.

I stared at him dumbly. Jason sighed and gestured with his hand to still empty passenger seat. I walked slowly toward the car and stood to face him, still not understanding . . . okay, so maybe I'm a little slow at times. He stepped back from the door and continued to smile at me, though there was a hint of nervous impatience in it now. I turned my back to him and slid into the car tentatively. He gently shut the door behind me and went back around to the driver's side.

Lucy and Allison had both slid into the back seat during the exchange. I looked at them to find wicked grins plastered across their faces. I would never hear the end of this. Never.

Jason slid into the driver's seat and shut his door behind him. He looked quite pleased with himself, the nerves gone. I wasn't sure if the act of chivalry was sincere or if it was a joke. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Jason started the car and pulled out. We drove in silence in the direction of my house. Playing my usual role of awkward silence-breaker, I asked Jason, "Did you find anything out today?"

He spared a quick glance away from the road for me, then turning back, answered, "I couldn't detect any sign of Dan. His scent is all over town, but it doesn't lead anywhere away from Shelby. My guess is that he either drove out of town, or is hiding somewhere. I'm leaning toward the latter. He does not intend to leave without Lucy."

Allison leaned her head between Jason and me, honey blonde hair hanging forward over her shoulders. "So what? We just have to wait

for him to come get us?"

Jason kept his eyes on the road while he answered, "Max is out trying to pinpoint Dan's hiding place. I will be staying with the three of you in case he tries to come for Lucy."

I crossed my arms and pouted. "Why do you get to be the one to stay with us, while Max has to traipse all over town?" So maybe I was a little grumpy about the stunt Jason had pulled with the door. Can you blame me? I still wasn't sure whether or not he was playing a joke on me.

He gave me a slightly offended look. "Max has a much better sense of smell than I do, and I have a much better chance of protecting you against Dan than Max does."

Couldn't argue with that logic, though I wanted to.

We pulled into my driveway and got out of the car.

"Where's your mom?" Lucy asked me.

"I forgot that she's off doing some study on birds in Washington today, luckily, so we don't have to worry about coming up with another excuse to have everybody over."

I walked to unlock the door and Jason came to stand next to me, first in line to go inside. He insisted on going in ahead of us in case Dan was waiting in ambush. He walked in and started checking all of the rooms for any sign of foul play.

I walked into the kitchen, leaving Allison and Lucy in the living room to watch TV. My mom had left money for pizza on the kitchen counter with a note that said as much. The note also specifically stated that I was not to have boys over while she was gone. Too late on that one. Ah well, as the cliché goes, what she doesn't know, can't hurt her. The list of things that I had to hide from my mom seemed to be growing exponentially of late. I felt a little sad about that. I was used to sharing almost everything with her.

I grabbed the portable phone out of its cradle on the wall and called Irvine's to order two extra large pizzas: one pepperoni, and one mushroom. Jason walked into the kitchen behind me as I was hanging up the phone. I looked away from him and noticed that the potted African violet in the window looked a little dry. I grabbed it off of the sill and put it under the faucet to give it some water, ignoring Jason's presence.

"All clear?" I asked, not looking up. I saw him nod out of the corner of my eye, watching me with his arms crossed. "What?" I asked grumpily, setting down the plant and looking directly at him.

"Did I do something wrong? You seem . . . hostile."

Sighing, I asked, "What was that stunt with the door about? Did you do it just to embarrass me?"

Jason looked taken aback. He stared at me wide-eyed for a

moment before answering, “Isn’t that what a guy’s supposed to do, when, you know, he’s trying to woo a girl?”

Woo? He was trying to *woo* me? I was too amused to remain angry. I tried to contain my laughter and failed. “Um, not that I’ve ever been *wooed*, but I’m perfectly capable of opening my own doors. Who gave you permission to woo me anyhow?”

He looked at me with a stubborn set to his jaw. “Well I am sorry that you have never been wooed, but it has been a *very* long time since I have done the wooing. I cannot be expected to get it right on my first try.”

I started laughing again, there was just no holding it in. Jason crossed his arms and tried to stare me down with a petulant look on his face. I kept laughing. When he began to realize the ridiculousness of the situation, he let that crooked smile of his slowly appear on his face, then he began to laugh along with me. Soon we were both laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe.

“What is going on here?” Allison interrupted. She had walked into the kitchen to stand in front of Jason and me with her arms crossed, tapping her foot on the tile floor like an angry parent.

“Woo!” I exclaimed, tears streaming down my face, doubling Jason’s and my laughter. Allison made a noise of exasperation and walked back into the living room with her hands in the air. Our laughter began to slowly die down, and we were left grinning at each other.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It was a very nice attempt at wooing.”

“Oh, no,” Jason replied sarcastically, “there is no salvaging it now.” He turned and walked out of the kitchen toward the living room, still grinning.

I stayed in the kitchen a minute longer, trying to control the smile on my face. Mustn’t get feelings for the vampire. Yeah Xoe, keep telling yourself that.

I looked out the window and caught sight of Brian, clothed in gray sweats, getting home from football practice. He had to walk home just like us other unfortunates without cars. He paused in his driveway, noticing Jason’s car parked in my driveway. He gave the car a less than friendly look and went into his house.

Frowning, I went to join the others in the living room.

Allison had pulled out several board games and laid them out on the coffee table. “Pick your poison,” she told Lucy and Jason. Before they could answer, Allison turned to acknowledge me. “What’s wrong?” she asked, taking in my lugubrious expression.

I shook my head ruefully. “Nothing. I vote for *Scrabble*.”

Allison grabbed the scrabble box and started setting up the board on the coffee table. Lucy began turning all of the little letter tiles

upside-down in the box since we'd long ago lost the bag they were supposed to go in.

"Max is here," Jason said an instant before Max knocked on the door.

I walked to the door and let him inside. "Did you find anything?" I asked.

Max shook his head. "Dan's been everywhere. He's crisscrossed his scent all over the place. I can't find a definite trail."

Jason chimed in, "That's what I expected. He's hiding out, waiting for an opportunity to strike."

"Um," Max began, "I found something else."

We all looked to Max expectantly.

"Other scents. There are other wolves in town."

"Could it be Dan's old pack, trying to find him?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Jason answered. "Packs don't travel much. They don't want to risk crossing into another pack's territory. That's why they hired me." He paused to think for a moment. "Could you tell how many?"

"Two, besides Dan," Max answered. "At least, that's how many I caught scent of."

"What do we do?" I asked.

"We do all we can do," Jason replied. "Wait."

So it looked like we would have to wait for Dan, and maybe others, to come to us. Gotta love a stake-out . . . or not.

I started to shut the door behind Max, but noticed Brian coming our way. I swear, he was worse than a puppy. I went outside and shut the door behind me. I had a feeling that a confrontation was in my near future. Brian stomped toward me, looking angry. He'd changed into a plain white t-shirt and jeans.

He stopped right in front of me, arms crossed. "I've been thinking about your story Xoe, and I have to say, I don't believe a word of it. We've been friends a long time, and if you're in some sort of trouble, I deserve to know. I can help." He gave me a slightly pleading look that was overtaken by his anger within seconds.

I didn't know why he was so angry. I mean, I could understand him being a little jealous about being left out, but this amount of anger was uncalled for. Men are always saying how difficult women are to understand, but they hadn't met the men in my life, they could give any woman a run for her money.

I stared at him blankly, considering my answer, then words tumbled out of my mouth. "Trouble's over. Dan left town, Jason and Max just came over to hang out."

Brian did not look convinced, but I hadn't really expected him to be. He roughly ran his hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture,

making his short curls puff up. He said coldly, “You’ve always been a terrible liar Xoe.”

Matching him stare for stare, I answered just as coldly, “What do you want me to say?”

Brian shook his head and swept past me, going for the door. My guilt turned quickly into anger. I didn’t owe him any explanation! How dare he! I ran after him and caught up as he was reaching for the doorknob.

I reached out and grabbed his wrist before he could turn the knob. Things seemed to go in slow motion. He jerked away from me with a yelp of pain. I looked at him dumbly, confused by his reaction. Then I saw his arm. A blistery burn, roughly the size of my hand, circled his wrist. I stared at him confused. My vision began to go dark. The last thing I saw was the terrified look on Brian’s face. Terrified of me. Then the ground came up to meet me.

I woke to dark blue eyes above me. Wait, hadn’t this happened before? The eyes disappeared for a moment, then I felt Jason pulling me into his lap. He leaned me against his chest so I could sit upright. My limbs ached with flu-like weakness. I couldn’t move. My vision faded in and out. Jason ran his hands up and down my arms, like you do when you’re trying to warm someone up.

We were outside my front door. Lucy, Allison, and Max had all come outside as well. Brian was standing a safe distance away, cradling his wrist.

“We had to fill him in on some stuff,” Allison said, nodding in Brian’s direction. Allison looked uneasy. She seemed afraid to get too close to the situation. I looked at Brian’s face. His face was set in angry lines, but his eyes held unmistakable fear.

Brian stared back at me, unable to make his face completely impassive, though I could tell that’s what he was trying to go for. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay before I left. I don’t want any part of—this. Whatever *this* is. I get the point. I’ll leave you alone from now on. You didn’t have to burn me.”

My mouth fell open. I tried to speak and my voice cracked. I tried again with a little more success, “I-I didn’t mean to. I don’t know what happened.”

Brian didn’t answer. He just turned and walked away toward his house.

Jason stood, lifting me up in his arms, and carried me inside. He laid me down gently on the couch as I heard the footsteps of the others following us.

Allison and Lucy came to hover beside me. I heard someone, Max, by process of elimination, shut and lock the door. Max walked up to stand beside Jason.

Allison looked in their direction. “Could we have a little privacy?”

Nodding and mumbling uncomfortably, the boys unlocked the door again and went back outside. The noises that came from their exit: the hushed tones of their voices, their footsteps, the click of the door shutting, all seemed like a distant dream to me. Allison lifted me up partially so that she could sit down and lay my head in her lap. She started stroking my hair, trying to be comforting.

“What happened Xoe?” she asked.

Lucy sat on the floor and grabbed my hand. Hot tears stung my eyes. I tried to stop them, but they flowed faster and faster. What *had* happened?

“I hurt Brian. I don’t know how, but I did.” My tears were a mixture of confusion and fear. “He’s one of my oldest friends and . . . and . . .” My words caught in my throat. “He’s afraid of me!” The tears turned into raking sobs. I hiccupped on my breaths, trying to draw in enough air and failing.

It was just too much. I had managed to keep my cool through everything that had happened, but this was just *too* much. My friends held me, Allison with my head in her lap and Lucy clinging to my hand, as I cried out my frustration and fear. Underneath the frustration and fear was an immense sadness. A sadness in knowing that life as I knew it had changed—forever. I had always had a solid sense of who I was . . . what I was. Now everything felt like quicksand. I was being sucked under into a new world, a new me.

When my tears had quieted, Jason and Max came back inside. They had probably heard the whole thing with their supernatural ears, but I was still grateful for the illusion of privacy they had given me. I looked at them, eyes red and puffy, and asked, “What’s happening to me?”

Jason knelt beside Lucy. “I think you are coming into your powers. Nothing like this has ever happened before?”

I shook my head.

He continued, “If this is just starting now, we can expect more powers to manifest, or for this one to grow in strength.” Jason averted his eyes.

I stared at him until he gave in and met my gaze. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Jason’s eyes held mine steadily. “This type of power is usually related to . . . demons.”

My eyes widened. Even if I could make sense of my friends being werewolves and vampires, I could *not* comprehend being a demon. Jason had told me that it was a possibility, but I hadn’t allowed myself to think too hard on it.

“Elaborate,” I said shakily.

“Well,” he began, “out of our three options, demons are the only ones that possess this type of destructive power. Merpeople are capable of a mild amount of enchantment, and Ogres are simply strong. The powers of demons tend to be more . . . obvious.”

I had an awful idea. “So . . . am I like, bad?” I asked, not sure I really wanted to know. I noticed Lucy dart a worried look up at Allison.

Jason answered, “No, as far as I know, the manifestation of your genetics is often dependent on your upbringing. Demons have an inborn tendency toward violence and rage, but they do not have to act on their impulses. You were raised like a human, and therefore think like one . . . You simply need to watch your temper.”

I looked a question at him.

He went on, “Demons are marked by their anger. I believe that is what your powers are linked to. You burned Brian because you were angry.”

The room was spinning. I had to focus. I held perfectly still, breathing deeply, trying to not let things sink in until I had gotten all of the facts. “What other ‘powers’” I gulped, “can I expect?”

“I am not certain. There are different types of demons. Their powers vary. Given that the first power you exerted was to burn someone, your abilities will likely be linked to fire.”

Fire? That could explain the dreams. I reached my hand up to pinch the bridge of my nose. I had a major headache building behind my eyes. “How do you know all this?”

He looked down briefly, then met my eyes. “I have suspected that you were most likely a half-demon since the beginning. I did some research, called some friends who are a little more knowledgeable on this type of thing. Half-demons are the most common human hybrid, more so than Merpeople and Ogres. Any other races that can breed with humans are either very rare or gone altogether.”

The room was still spinning. I closed my eyes to quell my dizziness. “Did your knowledgeable friends give you any other information?”

Jason lightly placed his hand on the shoulder that I wasn’t lying on. “I'm sorry Xoe, I've told you all that I know.”

I was overwhelmed, even with this scant amount of information. “What do we do now?” I asked, clinging to my last thread of hope. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a big deal. Maybe the “powers” would stop here. Maybe they would just go away. And maybe the moon is made of cheese to feed the little green men.

Jason replied, “There's not much that we can do. As your powers come, *if* your powers come, you will learn to control them.”

That sounded like a lot of trial and error to me. I’d already hurt

one friend. I shuddered at the thought of the damage I might do before I got things under control, *if* I got things under control. It was a very big if.

"Is there anything else I should know?" I asked, not really knowing what I was asking for, as Jason had already said all that he knew. The panic was coming back. I closed my eyes and tried to slow my breathing, afraid I was going to hyperventilate and pass out again.

Jason answered, "Probably, but like I said, I have told you all that I know."

Angry and frustrated I replied, "Well, then I guess we should just focus on Dan and the matter at hand."

No one argued with the sharpness of my words. Each person nodded his or her assent. I knew there was no way I was going to be able to focus on anything except my recent horrifying news, but I needed the subject off me. I had a lot of processing to do and no time to do it in. A girl's troubles never end.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We spent the rest of the afternoon playing scrabble, eating pizza, and trying to ignore what we had discovered about me. I'm usually pretty good at scrabble, but today I was filling up the board with three-letter words. The pizza guy had been really late, which I guess was good, considering what he could have walked in on. Plus, we got the order for free. My first slice was still sitting abandoned on a paper plate next to me. When we got bored of scrabble, we resorted to watching a movie.

I couldn't focus on the TV screen. I looked around at my living room and the people that currently inhabited it. Jason, Max, and Allison were sharing the larger dark blue couch that I had been lying on when I'd had my breakdown. Jason and Allison each clung to their respective corners while Max lounged in the center. I greedily hogged the mismatched purple loveseat. I needed distance, mentally and physically, to absorb all that had happened. Lucy lay on her stomach on the purple, blue, and green patchwork rug that covered the living room floor, using a throw pillow to prop herself up. My mom had gotten the rug to try and tie in the colors of our two couches, emphasis on the word *try*.

I hugged a green throw pillow, clutching it against my stomach. For the past few hours my body had been debating whether I was going to pass out, throw up, or scream. Maybe a little bit of each, hopefully not simultaneously. My worry had been building a solid knot in my gut. What had started life as a golf ball of fear and worry had grown to bowling ball proportions. The more I thought about everything, the less sense it all made.

For lack of any better distractions, I grabbed my mom's most recent *National Geographic* and went into the dining room. I pulled out a chair, sat down, and started leafing through the pages of the magazine, not really looking at them.

Lucy came into the dining room shortly after me and sat down on one of the high-backed maple chairs that matched the table. She nervously fiddled with a yellow woven placemat.

She smiled weakly at me. "No offense Xoe, but . . . I'm kind of glad you're a half-demon."

I gave her a 'you're kidding,' look. She was . . . glad?

She went on, "Not that you're a demon specifically, it's just nice that I'm not the only newly non-human one. I was feeling pretty alone."

"Well I guess when you put it that way, I'm pretty glad you're a werewolf," I replied.

Lucy smiled, a little more strongly this time. "Thanks for everything Xoe. I mean it. If it weren't for you I'd be curled up in a ball crying right now . . . or maybe worse."

You would think that at a moment like this Lucy would give me a hug, grab my hand, or even just pat my shoulder, just . . . something. However, Lucy kept her distance, hands neatly folded on the table. I had a feeling she wasn't as comfortable with things as she was trying to put off. It wasn't every day you found out that your best friend came from demonic origins.

I gave her a forced smile. "Glad to be of service." My own best friend was afraid of me. She was a werewolf, and she was afraid of me.

We were weakly smiling at each other when Allison walked into the dining room to join us. She whined, "Do you both realize that now I'm the only measly human left? It's so unfair. You get all these cool superpowers and I'm still just the same old me."

Lucy and I burst into laughter, releasing some of the tension. Allison crossed her arms and pouted, plopping down in the chair next to Lucy. She'd get over it. I wasn't sure I would.

I glanced out the wide dining room window. The sun was making its descent, giving way to darkness. Clouds obscured most of what light was left.

Lucy stood. "I guess I should call my parents."

"You think they'll let you stay over?" Allison asked.

Lucy shook her head lugubriously and trudged into the kitchen to retrieve the phone. Allison and I waited in silence in order to listen to Lucy's end of the conversation, short as it was. Lucy hung up the phone and came back to face us.

"No?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Lucy shook her head.

"Jason!" I called.

Jason came trotting into the dining room, leaving Max alone in the living room. "Yes?"

I sighed. "Lucy can't stay. What do we do?"

Jason sat down across from me in Lucy's vacated chair. "In all likelihood, Dan will expect us to stick together. He will check here first, since we have spent most of our time here. I will wait here for Dan. Xoe, you and Allison are going to leave now and hide at my

hotel. Lucy will go back to her house long enough for her parents to go to sleep, then Max will help her sneak out so that they can go to my hotel as well.Once you are all together, you will drive. I want you to stay on the move until I call you on Max's cell phone."

I rolled my eyes at Jason. "That's the *dumbest* plan I've ever heard."

Jason looked at me, stunned.

I went on, "We're not leaving you here alone to fight Dan. We've already established that he might have other wolves with him. You'll get yourself killed and then we'll be back to square one, only with one less person to help keep us *all* alive."

Jason glared at me. "I can take care of myself, I won't risk you . . . any of you."

I smiled haughtily. "Well seeing as this is my house, you can't very well kick me out. I'm staying and you have no choice in the matter."

Max chimed in, "I'm not human. I can help."

Jason turned to Allison. "And how do you feel about all of this?"

Allison raised her nose in the air, signaling that there were to be no arguments. "I'm staying with either Xoe or Lucy, preferably both. I'm not going to hide out."

We all looked at Lucy. I asked, "Do you think you'll be able to sneak out?"

Lucy looked down and shook her head, then forced her gaze to meet mine. "You know how my parents are. They check on me throughout the night. I don't know what they would do if I were missing, probably call the cops."

Jason stood, a little angrily. "So you all refuse to hide?"

"You got it," Allison answered.

Jason crossed his arms and glared at me. I smiled back sweetly, sure of myself. Finally, Jason gave one quick nod in agreement. "Fine, new plan. Dan will still likely check here first, so I will still wait here. We have already established that Lucy has to stay at her house, so Max will sneak in and wait with her." He turned to once again regard Allison and me. "As for you two, since you insist on putting yourselves in more danger, you can place yourselves at either house, but I would prefer it if you stayed with me. Max needs to concentrate on keeping Lucy safe and I will have a better chance of protecting you."

I had to point out the obvious flaw. "What if Dan goes to Lucy's first?"

"If Max catches scent of Dan, he will call us here from his cell phone."

Jason looked to Max as Max nodded his agreement.

It was a plan I could live with, and hopefully I would. I slapped my hands together and said dramatically, "It's a plan then, C'mon folks we're burnin' daylight!"

We all went together in Jason's car to take Lucy and Max down the street to Lucy's house. I watched Lucy go in through her front door and couldn't help thinking that it might be the last time I ever saw her. Who could really say what would happen? I felt tears stinging my eyes for the second time that day. On the drive back to my place, I began to have some serious doubts. At least, more serious than the thousands I already had.

"Are you sure you can take on Dan?" I asked Jason, "I mean, maybe we should have the same plan as Lucy and Max. If you smell him coming, call Max over to help."

"We can't risk leaving Lucy alone," Jason replied. "Dan is stronger than Max, but having Max there is still better than the alternatives."

There was something else that had been chewing at the back of my mind all night. Jason had managed to skim over it when I had brought it up earlier. "What about the other wolves that Max smelled? What if they're with Dan?"

Jason did not look happy. "There is nothing we can do about that. We just have to hope for the best."

Comforting, very comforting. "I think this is a really bad idea."

Jason sighed and kept his eyes on the road. "So do I."

What could I say?

Once we returned to my house, the three of us went inside and inspected the premises to make sure all of the doors and windows were locked. Then we sat down in the living room to wait. Allison and I squished onto the love seat while Jason sat on the end of the couch closest to us. Our plan really wasn't a plan at all. We were leaving things completely up to chance, and the chance of success was slim.

"Should we have weapons?" I asked Jason.

"I'm more efficient without weapons," Jason replied, "but I suppose it couldn't hurt for you and Allison to be armed."

Allison leaned over the coffee table to rifle through her purse. She pulled out a canister of pepper spray, holding it up for Jason's approval.

He shrugged. "It's better than nothing."

I got up and grabbed the poker from our set of fireplace tools and sat back down with it across my lap. Jason and Allison both raised an eyebrow at me. I shrugged. Better than nothing.

After about thirty minutes of Al and me jumping at every sound, Jason voiced that we should get some sleep. After all, we weren't even sure that Dan would come. The three of us went up to my room. Allison and I snuggled up in my bed, while Jason sat at my desk chair and kept watch. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, fireplace poker gripped tightly in my hands. Call it paranoia. I called it survival.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It felt like I had just fallen asleep when I was awakened by a loud crash downstairs. We all sprung up and thundered downstairs into the living room with our "weapons" to find Dan waiting . . . and he brought a friend. A willowy, tall woman with long dark glossy hair stood to Dan's right. Her features and deep olive skin were exotic, though I couldn't quite place them to a specific nationality. She wore tight black jeans and a matching shirt. Dan's pale blue eyes held malice. The woman looked uneasy. Dan matched the woman in dress: black jeans and t-shirt. The monochromatic duo come to call.

Glass shards littered the ground where Dan had broken the window next to my front door. Large spears of glass still remained in the pane. He had only needed a hole big enough for him to reach through and unlock the door. I was surprised that he had chosen to break into the front. He was either very bold or very stupid, or maybe he just didn't care. I was betting on the latter.

If the woman was a wolf, which I was guessing she was, we were over-matched, at least I thought we were. To tell the truth, I had no idea how two werewolves, one of unknown power and the other apparently pretty powerful, matched up with a vampire, a human, and a half-demon just come into her powers. We were about to find out.

Jason dove for Dan, not waiting for him to make the first move. They tumbled behind the blue couch, partially out of sight, leaving Allison and me to deal with the woman.

She rushed us, long hair streaming behind her. Allison whipped her hand up holding the pepper spray. She sprayed the woman in the face, but other than pinching her eyes shut in pain, it didn't seem to faze her. It didn't even slow her charge. She rushed on, grabbing Allison and throwing her against the wall behind us, next to the stairs. Allison hit the wall with a thud, then slid to the floor like a rag doll, going frighteningly still.

I stood, jaw gaping, staring at Allison's still form. My pulse thundered in my ears, blocking out all other sound. I turned back to our assailant.

The skin around the woman's eyes was red and swollen. She squinted at me, trying to see through her puffy eyelids, but didn't

seem to notice the pain anymore. So apparently pepper spray did have some effect on werewolves, just not as much of an effect as we'd hoped.

The woman began stalking toward me, crouched in some sort of fighter's stance. Her movements were liquid grace. I darted a nervous glance to see Jason and Dan grappling on the floor. Jason seemed to be losing. His body was mostly obscured from my vision by Dan's broad back. I watched in horror as Dan raised a hand that had sprouted claws. The fingers had gotten thicker, each tip dominated by a long, black claw. The hand had grown wider into a rounded square shape. The mutated hand dove down at Jason's chest.

I ripped my gaze away and forced my attention back to my opponent. She sniffed the air and looked at me as she cocked her head, perplexed. She still stood in her fighter's crouch, hands clenching and unclenching, weighing her odds. It took every ounce of my self-restraint not to run to Jason. A low growl tricked out of the woman's rose-petal mouth. Suddenly, the woman rushed, trying to catch me off guard.

I lifted my fireplace poker like a baseball bat. The woman leapt toward me. I closed my eyes and swung as hard as I could. I felt the poker connect with a sickening thunk, the force of the blow throwing me off balance. I landed on my butt a few feet away. I opened my eyes, expecting the woman to be ready to pounce.

The woman had gone flying back from the impact as well. She lay on the floor, stunned. I was rather stunned myself. I was *so* not that strong. The solid iron poker was bent near the middle. I held it up in front of my face and stared at it, not entirely sure of what had just happened.

My opponent was down, at least for now, so I took the opportunity to rush to Jason's aid. I reached them in time to see Dan once again gain the upper hand in the fight. He pinned Jason much in the same manner as he had before. One of Dan's shoulders seemed to be dislocated, the hand of that arm had reverted back to human form and hung limp at Dan's side. Dan cocked back his good arm, that hand still in claw form. He poised it above Jason's throat. It all seemed to go in slow motion.

I hit Dan in the head with my crooked poker as hard as I could. He stumbled off Jason and skittered away from me. Jason looked up at me in shock. Join the club.

Dan stood and he did not look shocked. He looked very, very angry. He glared at me through hooded eyes, panting like a bull ready to charge. A trickle of blood dripped from his scalp and oozed down the side of his nose.

Jason struggled to his feet, his chest dripping a copious amount of

blood. He stood by me, facing Dan, a united front. Dan looked across the room to his fallen companion. We had him outnumbered. He gave us a final look of pure hatred, then turned and ran out the front door, holding his limp arm against his side. What he wanted wasn't here anyhow.

Jason must have really been hurting, because he didn't go after him. I met Jason's eyes and began to take in the damage. His shirt was torn into bloody ribbons, completely baring his chest, where most of the damage was. Deep claw marks covered his chest and abdomen. White rib bones showed through some of the deeper scratches. I watched in stark amazement as the scratches began to heal themselves. It was like watching the scratches happen in reverse-motion, flowing together smoother than water.

Snapping back into action, I turned away from Jason and ran to Allison. I gently turned her onto her back and her eyes fluttered open. I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding.

Jason came over and crouched beside us. He took one look at Allison's pale face, then turned to me with a meaningful stare. "She needs to go to the hospital."

"N-no," Allison mumbled. "I'm fine."

I met Jason's worried eyes, and couldn't help glancing down at his chest again. The scratches were nearly sealed, leaving behind bright pink welts that began to fade as well. "Go check on Lucy and Max," I told him, "I'll take care of Allison."

Jason's gaze crept over to the unconscious woman.

I'd forgotten about her. "It's fine," I told him. "Leave me your car keys and I'll get the cuffs we used on Lucy out of the trunk."

Jason nodded and pulled his keys out of his pocket, handing them to me, then in the blink of an eye, he was gone. I helped Allison to the couch then ran out to Jason's car to get the cuffs before our attacker woke up. I paused to look in the direction of Lucy's house, hoping to see, I don't know . . . something. She *had* to be okay.

I took a deep breath and turned my attention back to Jason's car. I examined the little electronic black square that dangled from the key chain and hit the button to pop the trunk. The cuffs were in plain sight, along with the chains we had used on Lucy. I noticed that the lanterns were gone and wondered if we had left them in the warehouse. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. Maybe this was what it felt like to go into shock. I took another deep breath, then quickly grabbed the cuffs to rush back inside.

When I reached the living room the woman was still unconscious. I rolled her onto her stomach and cuffed her hands behind her back.

Allison was looking at me like she had never seen me before."Did you do that?" she asked. "Knock her out, I mean?"

“Yeah.” I still felt numb, like I was watching everything from an outside perspective, not really involved in any of it. I noticed blood on the side of the woman’s head. It had trickled to congeal in her long dark hair. I looked closer and realized that I had cracked her skull. I jerked my head away with a sharp intake of breath. I tentatively reached down to check her pulse, keeping my eyes off of her wound, but then jerked my hand back when I realized that I could see her breathing. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

Jason burst in through the front door, followed by Max. “Lucy’s gone!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"What do you mean she's gone! She can't be gone!" I practically screamed as I ran toward Max and Jason. I looked back and forth between the two of them, desperate for an explanation. She couldn't be gone. I finally focused on Jason as he began to speak.

"I found Max outside. He was unconscious. Wolf scent was everywhere, but it was not Dan's," Jason explained. "I went to Lucy's window. It was open and Lucy was gone."

"We were just a distraction," I said numbly, realizing that Dan had only attacked to keep us busy while Lucy was being stolen away. "H-how are we going to find her?" I asked, barely able to force the words out.

When Jason didn't answer me, I looked to Allison to see how she was taking the whole situation. She was sitting on the couch with her knees curled to her chest, not really looking at anything. Max went to sit down beside her.

Jason put his hand on my shoulder, turning my attention back to him. "We *will* find her," he said. "I promise."

"How can you promise!" I screeched without really meaning to. I went on a little more calmly, "You don't know that we'll find her. Dan has been one step ahead of us this entire time. We're playing his game and he has no rules."

"He's not going to kill her," Jason assured, "and I will not stop until we have her back." I didn't like how he said that Dan wouldn't *kill* her, rather than that he wouldn't hurt her. We couldn't stop him from hurting her. We needed to act. We couldn't waste any more time.

I stared at Jason and he answered my question without me having to ask it. "We at least have a place to start," he said calmly, and jerked his head toward the fallen woman, "if she'll talk."

I glanced at the woman, then back at Jason, meeting his blue eyes calmly, stare for stare. "She'll talk." I wasn't sure how I'd make her talk, but I was going to get Lucy back . . . one way or another. I shook my head at my thoughts. One day I was judging Jason for being a killer in his past, and now I was contemplating torture. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

Jason was still watching me, waiting for me to explain my

thoughts. I quickly looked away from his eyes and turned back toward Allison. “Allison?” I asked, not liking the fragile tone of my voice. She didn’t answer. I walked to the couch and squatted in front of her. “Al? You in there?”

“She needs to go to the hospital,” Jason repeated.

I looked back to find him kneeling by the unconscious woman.

“I-I just need a few minutes,” Allison finally said, “then we’ll go get Lucy back.” I cupped my palms over Allison’s hands warmly with an assurance I didn’t exactly posses, then left her and went to kneel next to Jason.

“Why isn’t she waking up?” I asked. What I thought was, *Please tell me I didn’t kill her*.

Jason answered without looking at me, “She must be a newer wolf. She's healing the damage, but slowly.”

Jason rose from the woman’s side and came to face me. He put his hands on either side of my face. His wounds were gone, his bloody shirt and pants the only reminder that they had even been there. I stared at his chest, unable to get my thoughts straight. My world was still in a fog. I felt cold.

“Xoe,” Jason said, turning my eyes up into his face. “I think you're going into shock.”

I stared at his face, not comprehending his words. He pulled me against his chest and wrapped his arms around me. My entire body began to tremble violently. Jason lowered us down to the floor and lowered me into his lap. I breathed in the scent of vanilla and trees, cringing at the smell of blood that tainted it. My trembling began to subside as my body grew warmer. I felt safe. I knew it was an illusion, but it was one I was grateful for.

“She’s coming to,” I heard Max say.

Jason and I glanced at him in unison, then followed his eyes to the woman on my floor. She began to squirm around against her bonds.

Werewolves, even new ones, didn’t seem to stay unconscious for very long. It was quite the time-saver. As the woman’s senses returned, she started trying to scuttle away from us. I expected defiance, but instead she cowered, terrified.

“I-I’ll talk,” the woman stammered. “I can t-tell you where they are. D-don’t hurt me.”

Well that was easy.

Once the woman, Lela, got talking, it was hard to shut her up. Apparently Dan had been trying to gather pack members as he traveled. He’d go from town to town, looking for wolves that were like Max, rare cases that had survived without a pack. I guess they weren’t as rare as we’d thought. He had only managed to acquire three pack members, including Lela. Lucy was Dan’s first attempt at turning

someone to be in his pack, to be his mate more specifically.

Whenever Dan would find a new wolf, he'd bring him or her into his "pack". Lela claimed that they didn't have much choice in the matter. It was hard for lesser wolves to resist an alpha, which Dan was. That was why most wolves went into packs willingly; their alphas would protect them from situations like this one. Dan had originally come to Shelby High to make Max join his pack, but he saw Lucy and things changed.

I looked down at Lela skeptically. "Why should we believe you?"

Her eyes widened even more, which a moment ago, hadn't even seemed possible. "I-I didn't want to join Dan. I had no choice, he would have killed me. He's like nothing I've ever seen, stronger and faster than he should be. I c-can tell you where he's hiding, where he'll take your friend."

I crouched down beside her. "Go on."

Lela told us that Dan was hiding at the old ranger station, roughly ten miles away from my house. It had been abandoned when the state built a new one a few miles east, about four years ago. So now we only had to go there, get past Dan and his other pack members, and get Lucy out. Ri-ight.

Jason, Allison, Max, and I got up to leave the room to discuss things away from Lela.

"Wait," Lela said, "there's something else."

We looked back at her expectantly.

"He wants Xoe."

What? "I thought I wasn't important, since I can't be turned," I said.

"He doesn't want to turn you, he wants to *use* you. He's obsessed with it. He thinks if he can find a way to control you, he can use you to solidify what he calls his *power base*. He's not exactly sane."

"Tell us something we don't know," I said, trying to act cool. On the inside I was shaking like a little girl.

We left Lela and went outside into the chilly night.

"Sooo what's the plan?" I asked Jason, as we all walked a little ways away from my house. We stood enveloped in soft moonlight that cast ominous shadows all around. I couldn't help trying to see through the shadows for any sign of eavesdropping werewolves.

"Can't we just call the cops?" Allison blurted before Jason could answer.

"And tell them what?" Jason replied. "That they need to go in armed with bazookas? Even if they did, their reflexes would not be quick enough. We would be sending them to die."

"Ok," I said, "there are three of them: Dan, and the other two pack members. Including Lucy, there are four of us."

“Five,” Allison chimed in.

“Sorry Al, you don’t really count.”

She pouted, so I humored her. “There are *five* of us, including Lucy. So, we just need to reach Lucy, and we should have no problem getting back out, five against three.”

“It's too dangerous,” Jason countered. “I'll call Dan’s old pack. For this, they will come. In the meantime I will try to stall Dan, and I will go alone,”

“Oh no,” I replied. “You aren’t pulling any of that gallant hero stuff with us. I, for one, refuse to be left out of the rescue.”

“Me too,” Allison chimed in.

“Me three,” added Max.

“Then it’s settled,” I said, turning back to Jason. “We go in together.”

Jason shook his head. “You could all be killed. He's not going to kill Lucy, but I don't think he will be as considerate with any of us. It's too risky.”

“It’s even *more* risky with just you going in,” I replied. “At least with all of us we have some chance of success. How long will it take for Dan’s old pack to get here?”

Jason met my eyes and tried to stare me down. I slowly crossed my arms and tilted my head to the side, staring back. Allison and Max came to stand on either side of me and mimicked my stance. Jason slowly nodded his assent, but he did *not* look happy about it. Too bad he didn’t have a choice.

Jason sighed. “Okay, here’s the plan . . . ”

The plan was that we would take Lela, in cuffs, with the pretense of making a trade. We knew Dan would never go for a trade, but if we could distract him with conversation, maybe one of us could get near Lucy and free her from any restraints she might have. The idea was that no matter what happened, Lucy would have as much chance of escape as the rest of us.

I was trying really hard not to think about the chance that we might not all escape. In the meantime, should we fail, we would hopefully have Dan’s pack riding in to rescue all of us. They were based in Utah, so they would have to fly. If they were able to get an immediate flight out, we would still have two to three hours before they arrived.

We went back inside and Jason went into the kitchen to call the alpha of Dan’s old pack. I listened to Jason’s side of the conversation as he detailed all that had happened. After a few minutes more, I heard the phone click into the cradle.

Jason came back into the living room. “They're coming.”

Max cleared his throat, turning everyone’s eyes to him. “What

about me and Lucy? Will they make us go with them?"

Jason didn't answer, instead he said, "You don't have to come with to the ranger's station, Max. You can just go home now."

Max crossed his arms at the wrists, then drew them to his sides, like an umpire calling someone out. "No way. I'm coming. We'll just have to worry about the pack when the time comes."

It was settled. We gathered Lela up and trooped out the front door, faces stern and somber: a vampire, a human, a teen wolf, another wolf who was terrified enough for the rest of us, and a half-demon without a clue. Bad guys beware.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There is a bumpy mountain road leading to the old ranger's station. We were all piled into Jason's car, bouncing as we crawled along. I was in the front passenger seat with my trusty fireplace poker across my lap. Lela was in the back, sandwiched between Max and Allison. Allison had traded in her not so effective pepper spray for a baseball bat we had found in my garage, though that probably wouldn't do her much good either.

I kept having to remind myself to breathe. My love for Lucy was all that kept courage running through my veins. The closer we came to our destination, the less confident I felt in our ability to pull off the rescue. Despite Jason's assurances, I wasn't convinced he could take Dan in a one-on-one fight.

Jason claimed that vampires were simply stronger than werewolves, though he did admit that Dan was stronger than any other werewolf he had ever met, confirming Lela's claims. It wasn't just Dan's fighting skills that made him dangerous. Dan had more physical strength and speed than he should have, than any werewolf should have.

As for Max, I was even more worried. The unknown, at least to us, pack member had bested him pretty easily outside of Lucy's house. Max claimed that his opponent got downwind and snuck up on him, but that fact alone made me think that Max wasn't a match for him.

I was the wild card in the situation. Including me, we were three against two, given that we couldn't trust Lela to join in the fight and Allison wouldn't be much help. I was stronger than I used to be, but I wasn't sure by how much. I didn't think that I could trust my new-found strength in the upcoming battle. I'd proven that I could deal a hit, but taking one, well . . . I was not looking forward to finding out how that would go.

"Please don't give me back," Lela urged, breaking the silence and my train of thought. "I can't go back to him."

"We're not going to *give* you back," I said. "You're just an excuse to get inside."

"But what if you lose? He'll take me back! I can't go back!"

I'd had enough. I took off my seatbelt and leaned into the backseat,

getting in Lela's face. "You helped Dan attack us. As far as I'm concerned *you're* the reason he has Lucy. Now you're going to help us get her back, and just be happy that you're still alive."

Lela cowered and pressed herself back against her seat as much as possible, hiding behind her long, dark hair, trying in vain to distance herself from me.

"Calm down Xoe," Jason said in a voice that was meant to be soothing. He had replaced his ruined shirt with a dark green cotton t-shirt from his trunk. Max and Allison had frozen in place, each shoved as far away from me as possible.

I glared back at Jason, a snarl on my face.

He spoke slowly, "Remember what happened the last time you lost your temper?"

I couldn't think. All I felt was white-hot rage. It felt like burning embers were eating me up from the inside. This wasn't what usually happened to me when I got angry. This was something new.

"Remember what happened with Brian?" Jason urged just as calmly.

The memory of Brian's scared face came flooding back to me, sobering me and chasing away my anger, most of it anyhow. My temper had never been this bad, not even close. It was an all-too real reminder of my . . . heritage. I sank back into my seat and crossed my arms, embarrassed by my outburst.

The bouncing of the car lessened as we began to slow. Jason pulled off to the side of the narrow road and stopped the car out of sight of the ranger's station. If a large enough truck came by, it wouldn't be able to fit past. Luckily, no one came up this way anymore.

Jason turned in his seat to look back at Allison. "You are going to wait in the car, in the driver's seat, in case we need to make a fast getaway."

"No way!" Allison argued. "You guys are *so* not going in there without me!"

"It makes sense Al," I said, trying to placate her, because I agreed with Jason, "you'll do us more good out here."

It was better for everyone if Allison stayed outside. She would be out of harm's way, at least farther out of it than the rest of us, and we wouldn't have to worry about protecting her while we were trying to protect ourselves. I was reminded that *I* was supposed to protect myself, and my heart sped a little.

Allison's face contorted into an angry pout. "Fine." She was *not* happy, but I'd rather have her mad at me than dead.

We emerged from the car, Max holding onto Lela by her cuffs and me gripping my fireplace poker. As we began walking toward the hideout, the unusually warm air gave my skin an electric tingle. My

earlier bravado with Lela had worn off. I was all nerves now. I stopped walking. “Umm, remind me again what the plan is?”

Jason stopped beside me, laying his hand on my arm, “You don't have to go in Xoe. In fact,” he gave me a small smile, “I would prefer it if you didn't go in.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m fine. Let’s go.” I was *so* not fine. What was I thinking? I didn’t know how to fight. Until tonight, I had never even been in a physical fight with a human, and now I was expected to fight werewolves with a fireplace poker? I looked up at the sky, trying to keep myself out of full panic mode.

The moon stood out in the middle of the darkness, still mostly full. Tall pine trees cast ominous shadows across the dirt road leading to the abandoned ranger’s station. Another warm breeze blew my hair back out of my face. Sweat beaded on my forehead.

Jason’s tall, shadowy form led the way toward the abandoned building. I was next, with Max following a few feet behind us, dragging Lela along. I could hear Lela muttering, “No, no, no . . . ” under her breath. I had to admit, I sympathized.

We approached the small, log cabin style building. It looked dark and empty. Had Lela led us astray? I looked back at Max. He nodded, confirming that Dan’s scent was in the area. Jason motioned for us to stop.

Jason crept forward to the wooden door. He paused, as if sensing something, then suddenly rammed his shoulder against the door. It flew open inwards, slamming on the wall inside. All was quiet. Jason stepped into the dark interior of the building. From where I was standing, it looked empty. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. This felt like a trap.

Jason whipped back toward us. “Max!” he shouted.

I looked back toward Max and Lela just as a dark figure barreled into Max. Max, Lela, and the attacker tumbled into the bushes at the edge of the road, out of sight down the four-foot drop. I started to rush to the area where they had disappeared into the foliage, then paused in mid-motion at the sound of male laughter.

I turned back toward the ranger’s station as a short, stocky man came sauntering around the side of the building. His shadowed face revealed a full beard and completely bald head. Small, beady eyes were swallowed by his protruding brow, emphasized by his lack of hair.

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting you guys to be *this* stupid,” the man mocked arrogantly in a gruff, scratchy voice.

“Were you expecting to be outnumbered?” I asked with false bravado.

“By the two of you?” the man laughed, “Sorry, no competition.”

He started to walk forward. “You think you scare me?” He chuckled to himself.

Jason stepped into his path. Jason spoke to me in a dead-pan voice, “Find Lucy.” His eyes never left his opponent. “Go!” he shouted, just as the man rushed him.

I went. I ran into the ranger’s station and began searching frantically, holding my fireplace poker ready to swing. The mostly bare room was still. I saw some dark shapes in one corner and ran to the largest shape, thinking it was Lucy. My heart dropped as the shapes revealed themselves as some bunched up tarps and half-empty gas cans. I checked behind the counter and in the small bathroom. Empty.

I backed into the main room and examined the floor. The moonlight shining in from the large wood-framed windows helped me to make out several sets of dusty footprints. One set led to the back door. I stopped to listen. I could no longer hear the sounds of struggle outside. I started to run back to the front door, but forced myself to stick to the plan. Our attacker’s purpose was likely to distract us while Dan escaped with Lucy. I couldn’t take that chance. I turned and ran to the back instead.

I stumbled out the backdoor into the woods. “Lucy!” I shouted. I started running down the trail that led away from the ranger's station. I continued shouting for Lucy as I ran. Drawing attention to myself probably wasn’t the best tactic, but I couldn’t think of how else to locate her.

Tree shadows played tricks on me, making me see hidden attackers at every angle. What if Lela had lied? Who knew how many wolves Dan had actually gathered? Suddenly, I was on the ground. A thrill of pain shot from my arm through my body. I raised my unhurt arm in weak defense as I waited for my unseen attacker to deal their next blow, but the blow never came. I struggled to sit up, looking for what had taken me down. There was a gnarled tree root sticking up in the middle of the trail. We had bad guys aplenty, and I was taken down by a tree root. I was afraid to look at my arm. I had a feeling it was broken.

There was a sound from within the trees to my left. I stayed sitting in the dirt and tried to calm the noise of my ragged breathing. I peered into the shadows in the direction that the noise had come from. “Lucy?” I whispered hoarsely through gritted teeth.

I heard the sound again, it was a soft whimper. I folded my arm gingerly against my chest, clenching my teeth against the pain. I struggled to my feet and followed the sound of the whimper, abandoning my poker in the dirt where it had fallen. I looked down to find that the underbrush had been trampled on one side of the trail. I

ventured farther away from the hiking trail, following the trampled path. I stumbled through the vegetation, wincing each time a hidden root or rock jarred my arm, until I noticed a dark figure huddled on the ground.

I clumsily ran to the figure, keeping my hurt arm pressed against my chest with my good arm. Lucy was tied and gagged. Her restraints were only rope, not silver chains. I knelt beside her and she started whimpering again, eyes shut tight. She was still in the jeans and tennis shoes that she had been wearing earlier that night. Smartly, she hadn't dressed for bed, else she'd be out here shoeless and in pajamas.

"Lucy, Lucy it's me," I whispered.

"Oe?" she asked through her cloth gag.

"It's okay Lucy, you're safe."

I crouched next to Lucy and used my knees to keep my hurt arm pinned across my chest so I could use my good arm to untie her hands. I struggled with the ropes for several minutes, but was finally able to free her arms. Lucy rolled into a sitting position, ripping off her gag. She started working on the rope around her ankles.

"Where is everybody? Where's Dan?" she whispered frantically. "We have to get out of here!"

"I know," I whispered back. "We need to be quiet, okay? Can you walk?"

"Yeah, I think so. I don't think I'm hurt." Lucy slowly rose to her feet. I carefully got up, bracing my bad arm against my stomach with my good arm again.

"What happened to your arm?" Lucy gasped.

"I fell. Can you help me tie it in place?" I glanced down at the rope that had bound Lucy.

She nodded, pulling off her hoodie. She picked up the rope and managed to *Macgyver* a makeshift sling for my arm. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth together as she slipped the contraption around my shoulders. I had to squat down so she could reach behind my neck to gingerly tie the rope in place. As her wrists passed my face, I noticed raw rope burns around them. A pang of anger at Dan stabbed my stomach. I took a deep breath and managed to contain it, not wanting to lose my temper again.

"Is that okay?" Lucy asked, then before I could answer she added, "Where's Dan?"

I let all of the worry I was feeling fill my face. "I was hoping you could answer that. I thought he'd be with you."

Lucy shook her head. "The two guys that took me brought me straight here. I haven't even seen Dan."

I nodded. The two guys Lucy was referring to had to be the two that attacked us; the one that knocked down Max and Lela, and the

bald man. That left Dan completely unaccounted for. “We have to go.”

I crept back toward the ranger’s station with Lucy following closely behind me. I tried to make as little noise as possible, but I felt dizzy and clumsy with pain. We stopped a short distance away from the dark building.

I turned to Lucy. “Allison is waiting down the road in Jason’s car.Go wait with her.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have to find Max and Jason.”

“I’m coming with you.”

I gave her a worried look, but I knew the stubborn set to her jaw. It was a look that she, Allison, and I had in common, and Jason and Max for that matter. It was a wonder that our group functioned at all. Here’s hoping we could all stay alive and continue to function.

Lucy was coming, and I had to admit I was glad for the company. We crept around the side of the station to the front door, where I had left Jason to face off with the bald man. The moon cast empty, still shadows all around. A chill crept up my spine. Something had gone terribly wrong. I should never have left them to fight alone. I crept to where Max had fallen into the bushes. Empty. That left the ranger’s station.

I had a fleeting urge to run back to the car and Allison, drive away, and pretend like none of this had ever happened. But Jason and Max were here somewhere, hurt, or maybe worse. I tried to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat. Please don’t let it be worse. They were here because of us. They came to save Lucy, to protect Allison and me. We couldn’t leave them.

Taking a deep breath, I crept back toward Lucy and the ranger’s station. Realizing my intent, she turned to walk into the building ahead of me. I saw movement on the other side of the door. “No!” I shouted, just as arms reached out and pulled Lucy inside. She let out a small scream that was cut off as soon as she disappeared into the darkness.

It was just like the stupid people that get killed in the horror movies. The whole time, you’re shouting at the screen, telling them to run and call the cops. Whatever you do, you should never go back into the creepy dark building. Well, I was going in at full speed. I skidded into the building and came to a halt. I spun around just as the door slammed behind me. I was face-to-face with more features I didn’t know. Dan’s third pack member.

The man was tall and dark. He leered down at me with nearly black eyes, holding Lucy tightly against his chest with one hand clamped over her mouth. He didn’t seem to notice her struggling and kicking against him. He smiled at me, revealing large, square teeth.

Dan's voice behind me brought my attention back to the room.

Max was lying in the back left corner with the tarps and gas cans that I had mistaken for Lucy earlier.Lying *very* still. What I could see of Max's face was covered in purple and black bruises, his mouth swollen and bloody. Jason was in the opposite corner with his back to the room. What I assumed were Lela's cuffs were now around his wrists. I had no idea how they had unlocked them given we'd left the key at my house. Jason was just as still as Max. I looked around the room for Lela, and noticed a wolf peeking out from behind the counter. It had to be Lela. I *hoped* it was Lela, and not the bald man. Either way, we were missing one person. The wolf looked terrified, if a wolf could look terrified.

I turned to Dan, who was still dressed in his black outfit. "What do you want?"

"Well," he replied. "I originally wanted to just take Lucy and be on my merry way. I had no intention of hurting you or your company, but you left me little choice. Now, because of all of the trouble you and your little friends have caused me, I want more. Your vampire killed David, and you managed to turn one of my pack members against me. Lela shifted and fought against Brent when we attacked. She seemed to think that you and yours would save her. I had to show her how very wrong she was."

I guessed Brent was the man holding Lucy, and David had to have been the bald man. Dan started pacing with his arms clutched behind his back, chuckling to himself, like the mad scientist in a horror movie. He had totally lost it. He asked me, "Would you like to hear my new plan?"

I glared at him.

"I will no longer simply take my dear Lucy and leave the rest of you alone. I will still take her of course, but now I will take you as well. There's more to you than you've led us all to believe. I've come to my own conclusions on what that is, but we'll have plenty of time to prove my theories true or false once we get out of town. As for the rest of your party, they will all have to die. And little Lela? Do you wonder why she is still in wolf form? We'll have to dispose of the bodies somehow." Dan walked closer and got in my face. Sweat had beaded on his brow and began to drip down around his crazed features.

I turned my nose up and peered at him with prideful eyes.

"Ah," Dan said. "I see I've sparked your temper. Don't want to do that 'till I've got you on a leash. Are you surprised that I know? It really wasn't all that hard to figure out."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said coldly.

"Tsk, tsk," Dan went on. "No more playing dumb, Xoe. I've figured

it out, that elusive smell, you smell like d*emon*."

"And how would you know?" I asked, fear leaking into my voice.

"Oh, I know all about demons, all about dealing with them too. Part of the draw of Shelby is its graveyard, perfect for calling on demons. You see, it's not only the size of a graveyard that makes it a proper catalyst for magic, but the age as well. Shelby's cemetery has both size and age, but that's a story for another time. We'll have plenty of time for that later. If you're a good girl, I'll give you any answers you might want."

I needed to keep him talking. I had to buy some time. Dan's pack *had* to be here soon. I asked conversationally, "But graveyards aren't evil are they? Why are they a good place to call demons?"

Dan smiled. "They're good for all sorts of stuff. Magic tends to collect in cemeteries. Raw power. I don't know the exact how and why, but the older and larger the cemetery, the more power that collects there." Dan began to pace with his arms clutched behind his back again. "The ritual needed to call a demon requires quite a bit of power, and with no magical talents of my own, I must rely on cemeteries."

I nodded. "But why would you want to call a demon?" I saw Max shift position slightly, gaining consciousness. I kept my eyes on Dan, urging him to continue.

Dan grinned like a teacher, proud that his pupil had asked a good question. "There is much to be gained in dealing with demons: strength, wealth, information, though there is much to lose as well. I've done pretty well so far. I may have even come across your father at some point. I'm guessing that he is your demon parent. Your mom doesn't have that particular smell. We'll eventually find out who he is. I can only imagine what he would trade for you."

I smiled bitterly. "He left when I was born. He obviously doesn't want me."

Dan chuckled again. "Well of course he didn't want you then, you were useless. But I imagine you have at least begun to come into your powers, after what you did to Lela. *That,* makes you far more appealing. He'll trade, and you will be reunited with dear old daddy."

Tempting as that offer was, I had no intention of meeting my dad. Dan's pacing had taken him closer to Max, leaving his back to me. I had to act, but what could I do? Suddenly, the door swung open and a loud crack resounded behind me. I spun around to face Lucy and the man called Brent. Brent had dropped Lucy to the ground, where she crouched, surprised. Allison was standing behind Brent's broad back, holding her baseball bat ready to swing again. Brent turned and grabbed for Allison, and Lucy jumped on his back. The three of them went tumbling out the door.

Arms grabbed me and threw me against the wall again. A new shock of pain shot through my arm as I fell to the floor. Bright splotches blurred my vision as I tried to catch my breath. I opened my eyes to see Dan's red, hateful face inches from mine.

He spat his words into my face. "I'm going kill all of your little friends while you watch. Even my dear Lucy. I've grown tired of her antics. And your vampire? His death will be special. Nice and slow. I may even make you help with that one. I won't kill you though. I may even let you go. I'll let you live out your sorry little life with the memory of watching your friends die. I'll let you live with the knowledge that you did nothing to stop me. You are powerless. A worthless . . . little . . . nothing." His anger had flipped a switch in his mind. It was like he had two different personalities . . . as if the situation could get any worse.

Brent came limping back in holding Lucy in his arms. I didn't see Allison with them. I tried to struggle to a sitting position, but my body screamed with pain. My arm felt like it was made of fire. To look on the bright side, at least I hadn't been knocked unconscious from hitting the wall as hard as I did. Hoorah for superhuman strength.

Dan stalked to the other side of the room and grabbed Jason by his cuffs. He dragged Jason across the floor and threw him next to me. Jason had apparently come to.

He looked at me with defeated blue eyes. "I'm so sorry Xoe," he whispered.

"Shut up!" Dan shouted. He walked to Jason and kicked him in the stomach.

Jason didn't so much as grunt in response. He kept his eyes locked on mine.

Dan sneered and got back in my face. "How shall we kill him?" Dan stood back up and kicked Jason in the face. Fresh blood poured from Jason's nose to splatter on the floor.

My vision went red. I felt my blood boil. Hot rage washed through my veins, numbing my pain. I welcomed it with open arms. I wasn't afraid of my new temper anymore. Anything to wash away the image of Jason's bloody face.

I thought of Allison unconscious on my floor after Lela threw her. I thought of Lucy, screaming as her bones cracked and reformed her into a wolf. I thought of Max, his black and blue face against the floor. I thought of never seeing any of them again.

I let the rage wash over me. I reveled in it. Gathering my strength I lunged for Dan, not sure of my intention. My good hand had barely made contact with his chest when he erupted in blue-white flame. I threw myself backward and fell back against the wall. The fire crept up his shirt and began to turn to orange as the clothing burned. Dan

dropped to the ground and started rolling, grunting in pain. The flames began to go out. I closed my eyes in defeat, waiting for the next blow.

I reopened my eyes to see a dark shape fly across the room, spewing liquid. It landed on Dan. I smelled gas. Max had opened one of the gas cans and thrown it when he saw the flames. Within seconds, Dan was engulfed in fire. He started screaming. He continued rolling on the ground, a few feet away from me, but he couldn't put the flames out. The acrid smell of burning flesh began to fill the room. His screaming became something shrill, almost inhuman.

I looked to the front door. Lucy and Brent had disappeared. I couldn't make myself move to find them. A wolf's face appeared around the writhing, flaming mass that was Dan. Lela crept up and laid her large wolf head in my lap. Jason had struggled closer to lean against me in a half-sitting position, blood still dripping from his nose. The room began to fill up with putrid smoke. Movement at the door caught my eye. Lucy stood holding Allison up, silhouetted by the moonlight and blurred by smoke, with Allison's arm across her shoulders. I turned my attention back to the burning mass. Dan had stopped screaming. I should have been scared. I should have been horrified.

I numbly looked past the flames to the faces of my friends and stroked the fur of the wolf that sat calmly at my side. Lucy and Allison looked horrified. Jason carefully avoided my gaze. I realized that I was smiling. I had set a man on fire. I wasn't scared, I wasn't horrified. I was glad. He had hurt my friends. Burn baby, burn.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Max had disappeared. I looked away from the disbelieving faces of my friends toward the back door, wondering where he'd gone. He came limping out of the small bathroom, carrying a fire extinguisher I hadn't noticed earlier. He shuffled up to the burning mass formerly known as Dan. He sprayed *it* with the extinguisher, putting out the last of the flames.

Lucy and Allison stumbled past me, to stand behind where I was sitting. I followed their eyes to the front door of the ranger's station to see a tall, dark man framed by the light of the moon. For a moment I thought it was Brent, but then the man stepped forward, revealing strong Hispanic features framed by dark, straight hair reaching well past his shoulders. He had to be Dan's old alpha.

"Abel," Jason said in greeting.

The man, Abel, nodded his head in acknowledgment. His voice was a deep bass rumble. "I see that we were a bit late."

"You can say that again," I mumbled, thinking that he wouldn't hear me.

He whipped his head in my direction. "Excuse me?"

My eyes widened in surprise. Damn that supernatural hearing. It took me a moment to speak. "Nothing, um . . . sir."

He nodded and turned back to Jason. "I apologize for your troubles. You will be compensated fairly. As a favor, I will ignore the three living werewolves in this room that are not of a pack. But they should be warned, that three wolves constitute a pack on their own. If they are all to remain in Shelby, they must file the proper forms."

I raised my eyebrows. I had imagined the forming of a werewolf pack as something mystical with loads of ritual and traditions. Filing forms just seemed so . . . mundane.

Abel continued, "Now I suggest you all leave this place. We will dispose of the remains of the deceased."

"Thank you," Jason replied simply. His nose had stopped bleeding. He waited as Max approached with a set of handcuff keys. I didn't know where Dan had gotten them, but it sure was convenient. Max freed Jason's hands, then Jason got to his feet and slowly lifted me in his arms.

Lucy and Allison came to stand beside us. We made our slow progression outside, Max and Lucy trying very hard not to make any eye-contact with Abel. Lela followed at my heels, still in wolf form.

The cool night air was refreshing after being in the smoky interior of the ranger's station. "I can stand," I told Jason.

He slowly let me down from his arms, but kept a hold around my waist so I didn't fall. The woods to either side of us were alive with the movement of the other wolves from Dan's former pack. I glanced up at the moon as I shook bits of ash out of my hair, not allowing myself to consider where the ash had come from.

We limped and hobbled back down to the car where we took an assessment of our injuries. Miraculously, I seemed to be the only one with a broken bone, though everyone else had a lot more cuts and bruises than me. Jason, Max, and Lucy had already started to heal, though Lucy was healing at a slower rate. The bruises on Max and Jason's faces were already fading into a sickly brown edged by yellow. Allison was not so lucky. Her entire back was a swollen purple mess and she had several gashes on her arms. Apparently Brent had thrown her into some bushes and decided the fight was over.

Lela, still in wolf form, had walked down beside me until we reached the car, making sure I didn't fall. After we verified that we would all survive, I eased myself into the front passenger seat, then turned to acknowledge her. She licked my hand, the one attached to my unbroken arm. I gave her a pat on the head before she turned and disappeared into the darkness of the woods.

With everybody loaded into the car, it was time I got to the hospital to have my arm examined. I was also healing a lot more quickly than I should have been, and Jason was worried that my broken bone would re-knit itself before a doctor could set it. I was able to convince Allison that she should get checked out as well. She was, after all, only human.

We drove back down the mountain, reeking of smoke. No one seemed to know what to say. What do you say after a kidnapping, a supernatural battle, and a murder or two?

"I smelled the gas, but how did you guys light Dan on fire?" Allison asked.

No one was answering. I sighed. "It was me."

"You mean . . . "

"Yeah, my demon powers strike again," I said bitterly.

"You weren't the one who killed him, Xoe," Max interrupted.

"I set him on fire and he burned to death. Yeah, I'd say I killed him."

"I got him with the gasoline," Max explained. "Don't blame yourself."

I didn't answer. I appreciated Max's valiant gesture, trying to take the blame, but I knew otherwise. It was my fire that had killed him, even if Max's gasoline had helped. I didn't really feel guilty. Dan totally had it coming. It was more the lack of guilt that was bugging me. I was already struggling with my loss of humanity in finding out about my heritage. Now I felt less human than ever.

We pulled into the hospital parking lot a little after 2:00 am. Our absolutely genius cover story was that Allison and I had fallen down the stairs in the house. Whatever . . . it would work. If anyone asked about our unpleasant odor, we'd play dumb. Allison and I got out of the car and headed into the hospital. Jason was going to get Lucy back home. If her kidnapping had woken her parents up, we would have a lot of explaining to do. We'd just have to hope for the best.

Allison and I got signed in at the front desk of the emergency waiting room. They insisted on calling our parents since we were both minors. Our moms were on their way, though it would take my mom several hours, seeing as she had to come from Washington. The doctor called me in first, deeming my injury the more serious one. My arm was in fact broken, my ulna to be more exact. The wonderful, wonderful doctor gave me pain medication and went about setting my arm and cleaning the various scrapes on my arms and back.

Eventually I went back into the waiting room, fresh plaster cast on my arm, to find Allison and her mom waiting. Her mom peered at me with her honey brown eyes disdainfully. My mom was still absent.

"What's your prognosis?" I asked Allison, trying to ignore the less than happy look her mom was directing at me.

"Some pretty major bruises, got a few stitches. Other than that, I got off pretty easy. The doctor gave me some pain meds." Allison was acting like nothing was wrong, but the way she avoided direct eye contact with me gave her away.

With that, Allison's mom stood and whipped her blonde hair in a perfect imitation of Allison, or maybe Allison's was an imitation of her mother, and they left me alone in the waiting room.

The hospital had decided that they weren't going to release me until my mom came to pick me up. Gre-at. I sat down in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs and prepared to wait.

Several hours later, my mom gently woke me up. A word of advice, never sleep in plastic chairs. I hurt everywhere. Of course, that was probably mostly from the beating I had taken. She hustled me out to her car where I instantly fell back asleep. The next thing I knew I was in my bed. I didn't remember getting home. A dark form was seated in a chair next to me. Noticing that I was awake, the form stood to hover over me. Jason's face came into focus.

"Lucy?" I mumbled.

“We got her home safe. Her parents never even woke up. Apparently our luck held.”

I tried to nod, but stopped because it hurt. “It’s over?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, sitting on the bed beside me. “I can leave town now, and let you get back to your life. Max will be here to help Lucy. But . . . if you want me to stay, I can, at least for the time being.”

“Stay,” I mumbled, before slipping back into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sunlight streaming in through my window woke me. Jason was still sitting in his chair. I felt miraculously better. Maybe being a half-demon wouldn't be so bad. The extra healing power sure didn't suck.

"Morning," I said, turning my head toward Jason.

"Morning."

I looked at the dirt on my visible skin. I scrunched my nose. "I'm going to shower."

Jason smiled. "I was going to recommend that."

I gave Jason a dirty look, then went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. My mom had left a wad of plastic shopping bags and a roll of masking tape next to my sink for putting over my cast while I showered. I turned on the water to let it get hot while I bagged up my arm. When I was sealed up and ready to go, I slipped off last night's clothes and stepped under the stream of steamy water.

The water that sped toward the drain was tinted with dirt. Ick. I would need to wash my sheets today. I started to one-handedly lather shampoo in my hair and could no longer avoid my thoughts. Lucy was a werewolf. There was a vampire waiting in my bedroom. I was part demon. I had killed someone.

I let the water stream over my face to wash away my silent tears. I didn't know why I was crying. I felt numb. We were all safe now. We had all gotten out alive. That was what mattered. I clung to that thought in order to drown out everything else.

I finished cleaning all of the dirt off me, turned off the water, then wrapped my fluffy purple towel around me to step out of the shower. I approached my mirror and cleared a circle in the condensation. I expected to look pale and fragile, like I had many mornings recently. Though I did have some serious circles under my eyes, I didn't look fragile. I looked, and felt, strong. We had won.

As I finished my reverie in the mirror, I turned to survey the bathroom, realizing that I had forgotten to grab a change of clothes. I re-wrapped my towel tightly around me and opened the door to my bedroom. Jason very carefully avoided looking at me while I shuffled through my closet looking for something to wear. I didn't really care if he saw me in a towel, but I appreciated the sentiment nonetheless. I

grabbed the deep red, long-sleeved shirt that Allison had picked out for me and one of the few pairs of non-holey jeans from my closet, went to my dresser to get underwear, then went back into my bathroom to change.

I had some difficulty pulling my casted arm through my shirtsleeve, but finally managed. I left the sleeve scrunched up to my elbow above the cast, then went back into my room. Jason was standing by the window, looking outside.

"I better go talk to my mom," I said.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked, without taking his gaze from the window.

"No, I'll be back up in a sec." I left my room and gently shut the door, then trudged downstairs to face the music.

I expected my mom to be mad at having to cut her trip short to bail me out of the hospital, but she was all sympathy. She had actually baked blueberry muffins while waiting for me to wake up. She ran up and hugged me as soon as I came down the stairs, then hustled me to the table. There was already a coffee mug waiting for me as she went into the kitchen to grab the muffins and the coffee pot. She set the pot beside my cup and set a blue ceramic plate with three gargantuan muffins on it in front of me.

"Umm, am I expected to eat all of those?" I asked sarcastically while filling up my mug with coffee with my good hand.

Ignoring my question, my mom sat down across from me. "So, I've been thinking, maybe I shouldn't go out of town so often anymore?"

"Why?" I asked, mouth full of muffin.

"You broke your arm and I wasn't here!" she shouted, then covered her mouth in surprise at her reaction.

"Wooaah," I said, waving my good arm in a calming gesture. "It's not that big a deal." I held up my casted arm. "It'll be good as new in no time."

"And how did it happen that Jason was around at two in the morning to take you and Allison to the hospital?"

"Um, we called him? Duh."

"Yeah, likely story," my mom said, smiling. "If boys are going to be hanging around, we need to lay down some rules."

I groaned at the mention of rules.

"First," she began, "I will be informed whenever you will be spending time outside of school with a boy. Second, when said boy is involved there will be a 9:00 curfew."

This elicited another groan from me.

"And finally," she went on, "know that you can always talk to me about anything pertaining to boys or otherwise. Now eat your muffins."

Unable to help my smile, I obliged and took another enormous bite. Mmm, muffins. Nice, normal, non-portentous muffins.

After breakfast, I went back up to my room to talk to Jason. As I walked into my room I saw that he had returned to sitting in my desk chair. He looked up from my copy of *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. I walked over to my bed and plunked down. Jason looked at me expectantly.

"Sooo," I began, "we haven't heard anything from Lucy or Al since last night?"

"I haven't," he answered. "Perhaps you should try calling them?"

"No. I don't know, I guess I'm afraid they won't answer."

Jason's face scrunched up in confusion.

I elaborated, "Allison wouldn't meet my eyes the whole time we were at the hospital, and Lucy never even spoke to me after what happened with Dan. It felt like . . . like they were afraid of me." I could feel cursed tears welling up yet again. I kept my eyes very wide, trying to prevent them from falling. I didn't want to cry anymore. You would think I would have run out of tears by now.

Jason rose to sit on the bed and wrap his arms around me. My last thread of restraint dissolved and tears fell in hot streams down my face. Jason held me while I spilled what were hopefully the last of my tears for the situation. We ended up lying on my bed, dirty sheets and all, facing each other. Jason's greater height put his head a little above mine. My tears had finally run dry. He gently stroked my still-damp hair while I regained my composure. He smelled clean. He had showered at some point, but I wasn't sure when. I thought about all that Jason had done for my friends and me. He had risked his life for us. Somewhere along the road I had gotten over the fact that he was a vampire and had killed people in the past. After all, I was a killer now too.

So I decided vampire-schmampire. I looked into his dark blue eyes, leaned in, and kissed him for all I was worth. The kiss started out soft, he hesitated slightly. I wrapped the fingers of my good hand in his hair and pulled him closer, making him give in to the moment. He put his arms around my waist and pulled me against him and kissed me like he meant it. When he gently pulled away I was left flustered and without breath. He smiled a small smile and stroked the side of my face.

"You have visitors," he said. He gently kissed my forehead, and then, just like that, he was up and out the window. A heartbeat later there was a knock at my bedroom door.

"Come in," I called.

The door swung open and there stood Lucy and Allison.

Allison came hobbling into my room and gently climbed onto my

bed beside me, obviously still in pain from last night. “Good morning sunshine,” she said to me smiling. “Glad to see *you’re* looking better. Non-human healing is *so* unfair.”

Lucy walked over to my bed with lowered eyes, and sat down beside me. When she finally met my gaze, there were tears in her almond eyes. I waited for her judgment, waited to be called a murderer, a monster.

“Thank you,” She said.

I looked a question at her.

“You saved me Xoe, you all saved me, but you most of all. None of us would be here if it weren’t for you.”

I closed my gaping jaw and grabbed Lucy in a hug. I let her go reluctantly. Allison scooted closer to the wall and I scooted to the middle of the bed, giving Lucy room to lie on my other side. We all lay there looking at the ceiling.

“So,” Allison began, “now that you’re a full-fledged half-demon and all, are you finally going to get over your hang-up about Jason’s past?”

I turned my nose up. “I don’t know *what* you’re talking about,” I said with a haughty air. I knew I’d eventually have to tell them about Jason and me, but for now, I could do without them making girly noises and kissy-faces at the mention of his name.

“Oh come on Xoe, he is *so* in love with you.”

“You know what Al?” I replied, ignoring her statement. “I think maybe *you’re* the demon.”

With that we all burst into laughter, and for just a moment were able to forget that our lives as we knew them had been turned completely upside-down.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Jason had to leave town for a few days to report back to Dan's pack and get whatever they were supposed to pay him, and to fill out some forms of all things. I didn't ask how much he was getting. However much they gave him, it wasn't enough. He has since returned to Shelby and he's staying, at least for now. He got himself a nifty apartment and everything. I'm pretty ecstatic about it, though I'll never admit it out loud. The whole dating thing is kind of new territory to me, but I seem to be doing okay. I finally had to tell Lucy and Allison. They would have found out eventually. The teasing has been ceaseless.

Brian's still not talking to me. I'm afraid that he never will. I can't really blame him for not wanting to get involved. I'm sad about Brian, but at least I still have Lucy and Al . . . and Jason. Max still hangs around. He follows Al around like a lost little puppy, no pun intended. She pretends not to notice.

I'm still learning to control my powers. I've accidentally lit a few things on fire, but luckily nothing living. Hopefully my luck continues, not just with my powers, but with everything else. Fingers crossed.

Accidental Ashes

Book Two

CHAPTER ONE

I was sitting comfortably on the green loveseat in my living room. Jason was beside me with his arm around my shoulders. I curled my legs up against his lap, content, then glanced over at the larger blue couch where Lucy, Allison, and Max sat.

In the few months since we'd met him, Max had managed to get us all addicted to watching soccer, which we were all doing now.

Suddenly, Max leapt out of his seat, spilling popcorn on the carpet. "Go! Go!" he shouted.

It was World Cup time, and the game was USA against Mexico. One of the USA players had the ball and was running ahead of all of the opposing team toward their goal. Now, I hadn't quite gotten a grasp on the rules yet, but I could tell this was a good thing. The rest of us jumped out of our seats and joined Max in cheering the player on. One of the Mexico Players was gaining on him.

"Ruuuun!" Max shouted while clamping his fingers onto his shaggy, sandy colored hair as if in pain. To say that Max was enthusiastic about soccer was an understatement. When you're around someone that devout, you can't help but get caught up in the excitement.

I watched the TV screen, unblinking as the Mexico player surpassed the USA player. Suddenly they collided and both went down. One of the refs came running up to the fallen players, blowing his whistle and yelling something at the USA player. The USA player got to his feet and started yelling back. Uh-oh. The ref whipped out a red card and threw the USA player off the field.

"What!" Max shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "That ref is delusional . . ." Max began a tirade, his pale green eyes squinted in anger.

I got caught up in the moment and started yelling at the TV along with Max, feeling a sudden surge of anger at what Max deemed an unfair call.

Then the TV exploded. Crap. Did I mention that I'm a half-demon?

The past few months had been eventful, to say the least. A stranger named Dan had come to town. He happened to be a werewolf. Because of him, my best friend Lucy is a werewolf now too. With the

help of Max (also a werewolf), and Jason (vampire), we had managed to rid ourselves of Dan. I won't go into the grisly details on *how* we rid ourselves of him. Let's just say that the event made me question my moral fiber more than a little.

Amid all of this chaos, I found out that my dad, whom I've never met, is a demon, making me a half-demon. Demons aren't bad or anything. Well, not *all* demons are bad. At least, that's what Jason tells me. I have an inkling suspicion that he only says that to make me feel better. Yet, seeing as I'm the only demon I know, I'll just have to take his word for it.

At the explosion my friends all went completely silent, then turned in slow-motion to regard me as one. I looked back to the TV. The screen had completely shattered, and the frame was a charred mess. Heaps of black smoke poured out of its smoldering innards to fill my living room with an acrid stench.

I stood under the pressure of their gazes only long enough to turn on my heel and run across my living room. I went right out my front door, slamming it behind me. I heard the door open and shut again as I ran toward the tall pine trees that border my house. The scent of pine and crisp air hit me, instantly clearing my senses. I wasn't sure I wanted them cleared at the moment.

This had been happening to me a lot lately, the blowing up of random appliances thing. When my powers as a half-demon first manifested, I had burned my friend Brian just by touching him. Since then, I'd graduated to blowing things up or just lighting them on fire. My powers were related to my temper, and that temper was mighty hard to control these days. Even the most insignificant things could make me mad enough to do some real damage. I couldn't control it, and the threat of what could happen weighed on me constantly.

I stood trembling in the dark, silent trees, my arms wrapped tightly around me. I would not cry. I would not cry about the stupid TV. The moisture that I felt slipping down my face was simply a raindrop. Yeah, a raindrop, that's it. I heard footsteps behind me, then felt arms gently wrap around me from behind.

I leaned back against Jason's chest and tried to take comfort in his presence. I unclenched my arms and rubbed my hands across the blue flannel shirt that encased his arms. I felt a slight bit of tension leave my body, but not nearly enough.

"You don't need to be so upset about it," he murmured. "We all understand." Jason talks kind of funny, probably due to the fact that he was born in 1883. He had picked up on many of the nuances of modern speech, given the fact that he'd been around to see it evolve, but he'd spent most of his life as a vampire alone, so some words didn't sound quite right.

“I know you’re all used to it by now,” I said between sniffles. “I just hate not being able to control it. What if it’s one of you next time?”

Jason squeezed me a little tighter, keeping me warm despite the fact that I was only wearing a gray cotton t-shirt and jeans in Oregon, in December. He brushed his lips against my cheek. “We must simply be sure that we don’t make you mad,” he said, trying to lighten the mood, “though it is a somewhat difficult task these days.”

I struggled out of his arms and turned to point a finger in his smiling face. “This is no time to crack jokes.”

He put his arms up in mock surrender. “Oh no! Don’t burn me!”

I pouted as I returned my hand to my side. “I could, you know. I could hurt you, or Lucy, or Al, or Max.”

Jason lowered his hands and took on a more serious tone. “You will not harm us. You have more control than you think. Otherwise, you would have blown me up a thousand times over.”

I crossed my arms and pretended to consider what he’d said. I nodded. “True, very true.”

Jason smiled. “Come now my little demon, back inside.”

I stomped my sneaker-clad foot on the hard, damp soil. “Half-demon,” I corrected sharply.

“Of course,” he conceded. Before I could react, he picked me up and threw me across his shoulder to carry me back inside.

I fake struggled, shouting, “I’ll burn you! Don’t tempt me!”

Jason paused and hoisted me up, getting a more secure hold on me. “I am well and truly terrified.” He easily held onto me with one hand while he opened the front door and walked us inside.

By the time Jason managed to plop me back down on the couch, Lucy had swept up all of the TV bits and was emptying the dustpan in the kitchen. Jason left me to help Max lift what remained of the TV frame to take it outside, where it would await a ride to the dump. Poor TV. I didn’t know how I was going to explain this one to my mom. I mean, appliances only catch fire so often. The toaster and the washing machine had each already met their untimely demise.

Jason returned to sit beside me on the couch, wrapping his arm around my shoulders again. Allison came to stand in front of me while shrugging on her fake-fur lined coat. She pushed her long, honey blonde hair behind her ears, then leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. “We’re taking off Xoe. Call me tomorrow.”

I gave her a feeble wave goodbye. Lucy leaned over the back of the couch to give me a hug, enfolding me in her petite arms and long, pin-straight black hair. As soon as Lucy backed away, Max gave my shoulder a comforting squeeze, and soon I was alone with Jason. For a little while anyway. My mom would be home from doing her

Christmas shopping soon.

I snuggled up against Jason's broad, muscled chest (not over-muscled mind you. I like my men lean). His hand lifted to stroke my pale blonde hair. It had grown long enough to brush past my shoulders. I was overdue for a cut.

I turned my head so I could look into Jason's deep blue eyes, and I do mean deep blue, like the color of the sky just before it turns to black. I'd never seen eyes that could be that dark and still manage to look blue until I met him. "Sorry I'm so messed up right now," I said quietly. "I just can't seem to get used to all of this demon stuff."

Jason smiled down at me warmly. "It's a lot to take in. You are doing well, given the circumstances."

I looked back down at my lap, feeling like a failure despite his encouragement.

Jason continued to watch me, being far too observant for his own good. "What's wrong Xoe? I can tell you have something to say."

I debated for a few seconds on whether or not I wanted to tell him. I sighed. Here went nothing. "The dreams started again."

Several months ago, before my life went to hell-in-a-hand-basket, I had started having these dreams, and I always awoke with a fever. I dreamed of fire, then I found out that I was part demon. A wolf was in one of my dreams, and my best friend got turned into a werewolf.

Once things had calmed down, I'd finally confided in Jason about the dreams. The only other people who had known were my mom and Lucy. Jason had instantly come to the conclusion that I had a minor gift at premonition, and it had come out in my dreams.

Jason's arms tightened around me slightly. "Tell me."

"Well," I began, "the fire's back, for starters, but this time none of my friends or family are there." I had seen my mom and my friends consumed by the flames in my previous dreams. "At first, I think that I'm alone, then I feel a presence at my side. I blink, and when I open my eyes, there is a man silhouetted against the flames. I can't see him, but I somehow know him. Then, he turns away from me and jumps into the fire."

Jason was silent for a moment. He snuggled a little closer to me, if that was even possible. "Do you have any idea what it means?" he asked finally.

I shook my head morosely. "Not a clue, but I don't like it."

"Nor do I," he replied quietly. "Have you told anyone else?"

I shook my head. "Nope. There's no sense in worrying the others. It could be nothing."

He gave me a very knowing smile. "Or it could very well be something. It can't hurt to have everyone on their guard."

"But on guard for what? We don't even know who the man in the

dream is."

"All the more reason to be prepared for anything," he countered.

I pursed my lips into a pout. "So, in other words, you're not just going to let me ignore it in the hopes that it goes away?"

He grinned down at me. "Like you did with me?"

I shoved away from him playfully. "I did *not*."

"Yes, uh-huh," he replied. "You utterly refused to admit your feelings for me until after we almost died."

I raised my eyebrows coyly. "Who says I have feelings for you?"

He grabbed me and pulled me close again. "I'm a vampire," he answered dramatically. "We can sense these things."

Our banter was interrupted by the sound of a key in the door. A few seconds later, my mom walked in, hands full of shopping bags. She threw her bags on the floor and stripped off her khaki, knee-length trenchcoat to reveal dark-wash jeans and a dark brown, cable-knit sweater. Her newly shoulder length, dark brown wavy hair blended into the sweater so that you couldn't tell where one stopped and the other began. She walked toward us and threw her coat across the back of the loveseat. "Hey you two, what are you . . . where's the TV?"

I smiled nervously.

"Not again?" my mom sighed loudly in her rich, throaty voice. I like to lie to myself and pretend that my voice sounds like hers, but in reality mine's an octave or so higher. Though our voices are the least of our differences. My pale skinned, green eyed genetics were obviously not passed on from my mom's side. Our looks are on opposite sides of the color spectrum.

I nodded, while attempting to hold my nervous smile in place. "I think, maybe, we have like, an electrical problem or something?"

My mom put her hands on her hips. "An electrical problem that causes household appliances to spontaneously combust?"

Jason and I both shrugged.

My mom stared at us skeptically, then turned to re-gather her shopping bags. I couldn't imagine what she actually thought about the exploding appliances. She had played it pretty cool so far, but her observant patience could only last so long.

My mom stopped to regard us again before she went up the stairs to her bedroom. "I'll call the electrician tomorrow." Then, when she reached the top she shouted. "And it's 9:00!"

9:00 was my *boy curfew*, 11:00 on weekends. After that, Jason either had to go home, or if we were out, I had to come home. Jason reached up and touched my face, gently guiding me toward him. He leaned forward and met my lips for a chaste kiss. His lips were warm and soft against mine. I lifted my arms to wrap behind his neck,

twining my fingers in his tousled dark brown hair. The kiss turned a little less chaste. Before I knew it, I had scooted onto Jason's lap. His arms circled my waist and pulled me against him. I sank into his warmth, feeling my troubles melt away.

This was a relatively new feeling for me, feeling absolutely safe in someone's arms. My dad had never been around, and as hard as my mom tried, she just didn't really fit into the big, strong protector role. Up until now, I'd always felt that I simply had to protect myself. It wasn't a bad feeling, but it could be lonely. In other words, it wasn't about needing to be protected, I just enjoyed finally having the option. Our little session went on for a while longer, until I reluctantly pulled back.

I met his dark blue eyes again and almost dove back in for more. Sadly, I managed to restrain myself. "See you tomorrow?"

He gave me one more gentle kiss. "You could not keep me away."

He was up and out the door in 5 seconds flat. It still unnerved me how quickly he moved. It was even more unnerving when Lucy did it, though she wasn't as fast as Jason. I wasn't very fast at all, and not for lack of trying. Hanging out with werewolves and a vampire all of the time had brought me to the conclusion that I was the worst half-demon ever. I just couldn't compete.

During my reverie I checked to make sure that Jason had locked the front door behind him, which he had, as always, then I journeyed upstairs to my bedroom. I readied myself for bed in the adjoining purple themed bathroom, then changed into green flannel pj pants and an oversized David Bowie t-shirt. I sat down on my dark green comforter and hugged a yellow cased pillow to my chest. I was *so* not ready for bed.

I looked over at my computer desk with its backdrop of old-school horror movie posters, and contemplated surfing the web for a while. Finally, I settled on snuggling up in bed and reading my copy of Stephen King's *Desperation* that Jason had recently purchased for me. There was nothing in that book that would be more frightening to me than my dreams.

When I finally shut off the lights, I gave a weak prayer that I wouldn't visit any dark places filled with fire. Fat chance.

CHAPTER TWO

Fire was all around me. I'd become rather used to fire, in the dream-world as well as in the real one. I sat cross-legged on a cold stone floor and watched the shadows of the flames dance in the darkness around me. I wasn't scared, I was more . . . Peaceful, which was a nice change of pace.

I looked to my side to see the man from my previous dream was sitting beside me in the same cross-legged position. I couldn't see his face, but once again felt like I somehow knew him. He held up one hand and snapped his fingers. A small flame appeared in-between his thumb and index finger, as if he'd lit a lighter, only there wasn't any lighter. Flames reflected off his teeth as his mouth curled into a smile. The rest of his face remained hidden in shadow.

I slowly lifted my hand and mimicked his actions, producing a small flame of my own. I stared at my hand and smiled, pleased with what I had accomplished, though normally my powers didn't please me at all. This seemed to be one I actually had some control over.

When I turned back to smile at the man, he was gone, and the fire was gone from my surroundings. The smile slipped from my face as I realized I'd been left alone in the cool, stony darkness.

I woke at 8:10am. It was a Tuesday, but it was also winter break, so no school. Hallelujah. I cringed upon remembering that my wish for a dreamless night had not been granted. My pajamas were soaked with sweat from the inevitable fever.

I dragged myself out of bed and padded barefoot downstairs for breakfast. My mom had already left for work, and had left me a half-pot of coffee, bless her soul. The cold tiles of my cheerful kitchen were a shock in my partially-awake state. I grabbed a blue ceramic mug from one of the maple colored cabinets and filled it to the top, foregoing cream. I stayed standing in my sunny yellow kitchen for a few minutes enjoying my coffee and looking out the kitchen window to the lush vegetation. This had become my Winter Break morning ritual.

As I watched, Brian came trotting out of the front door of his house, wearing light gray sweats with his short curly brown hair still frizzy from sleep. He paused and glanced in the direction of my house.

I gasped and sidestepped out of view of the window, sloshing scalding coffee on my hand. I stood silently cursing, waiting for Brian to move on.

Brian had been one of my best friends, until I'd accidentally burned him with my newfound demon powers. I had passed out shortly after. While I was unconscious, Lucy and Allison had filled Brian in on everything: demons, werewolves, and the whole kit and caboodle. Brian had not taken it well. He hadn't spoken to me since. I wasn't sure if I blamed him.

A knot formed in my throat at the memory of harming him. I took a deep steadying breath, telling myself that I was done crying over the ordeal. I stole a quick glance out the window to see Brian trotting down the road away from me on his morning run. I grabbed a paper towel to blot the cooling coffee off my hand and the floor. As I dried off my hand, I realized that the coffee hadn't left a burn. In fact, my hand wasn't even the slightest bit red. Another Demon power? I guess it would make sense. I could burn other people without getting burned myself. Maybe I couldn't get burned period. Had I actually gained a power that didn't have any drawbacks? I smiled and headed upstairs to take a shower with a little extra spring in my step. Maybe I'd make my water extra hot, just because I could.

My bathroom hadn't changed much in the last year: purple rug and towels, marble-tiled shower, pedestal sink beneath a large circular mirror. I turned on the shower and waited for it to heat up, then stripped off my pajamas and stepped in. The hot water eased tension in my shoulders that I hadn't even realized was there. I started washing my hair with my new lemongrass scented shampoo, while going over a mental checklist of the things I needed to do that day.

First, I needed to go Christmas shopping. I had managed to save up eighty dollars of my allowance money for that purpose, since I don't have a job. Hopefully Jason wouldn't mind giving me a ride for said Christmas shopping, since I don't have a car. I had also promised my mom that I would put together a bookshelf she had gotten at *IKEA*. My mom is horrible at directions, so such tasks usually fall to me. After all that was done, I was supposed to go to Lucy's house to bake cookies with her family. We did it every year.

Once squeaky clean, I stepped out of the shower and wrapped my fluffy purple towel around me. I used a blow-dryer on my hair, which was an addition to my routine that I had grudgingly accepted after much insistence from Allison. And no, I did not do it to impress Jason. I wanted to look good for me, damn it.

I got dressed in a burgundy sweater and well-worn jeans, then pulled on my faded gray sneakers. I left my room and arrived back downstairs just in time to hear a knock at my front door. I trotted up

and unlocked to door to find Jason waiting outside, dressed in a charcoal fleece sweatshirt (Oregonians are big on fleece) and jeans. He held a stack of envelopes and a few catalogues in his hand.

"Got your mail," he said, handing the pile to me.

I turned to go back into my living room with the mail gripped against my chest, leaving the door open for Jason to follow me in. I walked into the dining room, spilling the mail onto my rectangular, pale wood dining table. I started shuffling through the pile, looking for anything that might be addressed to me as Jason came into the room behind me. He pulled out a chair done in the same pale wood as the table with a bright yellow seat cushion that matched the placemats. He sat quietly watching me, as he often does. It used to make me uncomfortable, but I've gotten used to it.

I lifted a white business envelope that was addressed to Alexondra Meyers from the pile. I glared at my un-shortened name, then examined the envelope skeptically (I don't usually get any mail). There was no return address. I glanced up at Jason and shrugged, then started carefully tearing it open. I pulled out a folded white piece of computer paper that felt like it had a thick stack of paper inside. I unfolded it, and a stack of one hundred dollar bills went tumbling to the table, held together by a thin strip of white.

Shocked, I grabbed the money and held it up to Jason. He cocked his head. "Is there a note?"

As a matter of fact, there was. There was another piece of computer paper folded up inside the first one to accompany the bills. I slowly unfolded it, my fingertips feeling numb with shock.

"To Miss Alexondra Meyers,

Enclosed is your payment for aiding in the situation with our rogue wolf a few months back. Your vampire told us of your request to forgo monetary compensation, yet I feel I must go against your confusing wishes. I do not enjoy owing favors, and like it or not, without payment, that is exactly what I would owe you. I hope to work with you and your strange lot of friends in the future.

Sincerely,

Abel"

MY JAW DROPPED. "It's from Abel," I stuttered.

Jason's midnight blue eyes widened in surprise. "I told him that you did not desire payment."

I nodded. "He says he doesn't want to owe me a favor."

Jason smiled wistfully at that. "Wolves can be strange with such things."

Some explanation. Abel was the alpha of the pack that Dan had run away from. Jason had originally been hired to track Dan until he entered an area with a local wolf pack, so that they could kill Dan because he had killed a human, breaking an unbending werewolf law. After things had gone bad, and Dan was reduced to a smoldering pile of ash, Abel and his wolves had come to clean up the mess.

I picked up the bills from where I had placed them on the counter. I started counting, placing each bill back on the table as I went. As the pile on the table grew larger, so did my utter disbelief. I placed the last bill on the pile and stood staring at it, unable to breathe, let alone speak.

"How much?" Jason questioned.

I didn't answer.

"Xoe? How much?"

I snapped out of my fog. "T-ten thousand dollars."

Jason simply nodded. "That is around what I would expect."

I peered at Jason, stunned. "Who on earth sends ten thousand dollars cash in the mail?"

Jason answered matter-of-factly. "Bounty hunters deal only in cash. I assume he would have delivered it in person if he could. He is a very busy man."

I collapsed into one of the dining room chairs. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

Jason cocked his head again, not understanding my question.

I clarified, "What am I supposed to do with ten thousand dollars cash? I can't very well open a bank account for it. I'm only sixteen. I can't open a bank account by myself period."

Jason nodded, taking in my dilemma. "If you would like, I will deposit whatever portion of it you desire into the savings portion of my account. I will order you a card so that you can withdraw it as you choose."

I nodded, still unable to gather my thoughts into a cohesive unit. "Well, at least I'll be able to do all of my Christmas shopping now."

Jason smiled. "Have you eaten breakfast? We can stop somewhere after we visit the bank if you would like."

I nodded and stood. Jason vacated his seat and waited for me to gather up my ridiculous amount of money before we headed for the front door. We walked outside in silence, then a thought dawned on me as we were sliding into Jason's fancy charcoal grey car. "If I got ten thousand just for doing the final deed, how much did you get?"

Jason smiled and put the car in drive. "Bounty hunting is a very lucrative business."

CHAPTER THREE

When we arrived at the bank, I waited in the car while Jason went inside to deposit my money. I'd kept one thousand of it out, figuring I'd spend it on Christmas presents. Plus, I'd heard somewhere that if you deposit ten thousand dollars or more into a bank account, the bank had to declare it to the IRS. That was as much as I knew about that subject, and Jason probably knew more than I did, but better safe than sorry. I think more than anything I was trying to avoid thinking about how guilty I felt about the money. It seemed all too much like blood-money. Dan totally had it coming, but I still felt like an assassin. Maybe buying big presents for my loved ones would take some of the weight off my conscience. Maybe.

Jason walked back out of the bank toward the car. A ray of sunshine peeked through the cloudy sky to reflect off his sunglasses. And no, my vampire doesn't sparkle. Jason slid back into the driver's seat and put his seatbelt on. "Your card should arrive in the mail within a few days, and you can set your pin number by phone. If you want any of your money before that, just let me know."

I smiled. "Sounds good, thanks. Where do you want to get breakfast?"

"IHOP?" he asked grinning.

Jason had developed a major penchant for IHOP. Until he met me, he had never even eaten there. And yes, I know what you're thinking. But isn't he a vampire? Yes, he is, but despite the legends, he eats people food, is awake during the day, and is rather fond of garlic.

I sighed loudly in mock exasperation. "Oooookay."

Jason put his hand on my leg with a grin and whipped out of the parking spot, driving like a maniac all the way to IHOP. Once we arrived, we were seated almost right away. After we slid into a corner booth by a window, we both ordered coffee and blintzes.

"So," I began while the waiter filled our cups. "How much did Abel give *you*?"

Jason looked down. I'd say he was embarrassed if I didn't know any better. "Five thousand," he answered finally.

I started to laugh, but held it in . . . mostly. "Why on earth did you get less than me?"

He grimaced. “Abel wasn’t terribly pleased with the job I did.”

My grin widened. “Really?”

Jason sighed loudly, seeing that I wasn’t going to let it go. “My job was to keep an eye on Dan, and make sure he didn’t cause any mischief, until such a time when a pack could take him into custody.”

I frowned at his mention of Dan’s *mischief*. Yeah, mischief was one thing to call it. Some other useful words might have been havoc, destruction, mayhem . . . get the idea?

I said thanks as the waiter set our blintzes on the table, strawberry for me, blueberry for Jason, then turned back to our conversation. “So, can you handle being with a girl who makes more money than you?” I mocked.

He smiled wickedly. “Of course I can, as long as you realize one thing.”

“And what’s that?” I prompted when he didn’t continue.

He smugly took a bite of his blintz and swallowed with a satisfied grin. “That the breadwinner in the relationship has to pay for breakfast.”

I pouted. “You know what?”

“What?” he asked before shoving more blintz into his mouth.

“Wearing the pants totally sucks.”

He patted my hand in sympathy. “You’ll get used to it.”

I frowned. “Doubtful, very doubtful.”

After a few minutes of eating in silence, I knew it was time for me to convince Jason of our next stop. “So…” I began with a flirtatious smile on my lips.

Jason ducked his head and smiled, knowing all too well what the smile meant. “Where are we going next?” he asked, feigning frustration.

“I need to do my Christmas shopping,” I stated sweetly.

“Can I just drop you off?” he asked hopefully.

I gasped and held my hands to my chest. “You would abandon little ol’ me to fend for myself?”

He took his last swig of coffee then thumped the empty mug onto the table and smiled at me. “Not in a million years.”

I laughed as we got up to leave, pleased that I’d gotten my way. He also paid for the food, so apparently the money thing hadn’t hurt his pride *too* much. By the time we reached the car, I felt I had fully recovered from the experience of receiving a large sum of money in the mail, and was ready to spend some of it.

The shortest way to the mall passes right by Shelby’s cemetery. Though the cemetery gives me the major creeps, pride would not allow me to suggest a different route. The cemetery had always creeped me out, but my phobia had become even worse since the Dan

incident. The entire reason Dan had even decided to pass through Shelby was its large, old cemetery, or so he'd said. He had made a few deals with demons to make himself more than a regular werewolf. I had always passed off the feeling I got in cemeteries as superstition, but Dan had informed me otherwise.

Cemeteries are full of magic; the older and larger the cemetery, the better. On the rare occasions I'd had to visit the cemetery, I'd felt like the spirits of the dead were pushing down on me, making the air thick in a very ominous sort of way. Apparently it was all of the loose, unused magic that made me feel like I was suffocating. Dan had used that magic to call the demons he dealt with.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as we drove by the cemetery. I felt Jason's hand give my leg a light squeeze. He must have sensed my discomfort. "Are you well?" he asked.

I nodded my head, but kept my eyes closed.

Jason let the subject drop. Smart man.

I opened my eyes when I was sure that we were past all the graves. It only took a minute more for us to reach Shelby's small mall. Jason turned into the parking lot and parked near one of the larger department stores. I waited in the car while he walked around to get my door for me. Yeah, I know, a little outdated, and I would have much rather just opened the door myself, but it made Jason happy to do it, so I waited in the car like a proper young lady. Who says I can't compromise?

We walked through the parking lot, then into the mall, Jason holding the door for me once again. I was slightly taken aback by the crowds of people and the blaring fluorescent lighting as we entered the first row of stores. Nondescript Christmas music hummed in the background of the din of shopper's voices. It was almost as bad as the cemetery . . . almost.

Jason looked down at me. "Would you like to shop alone, or shall I stay with you?"

"Alone. I plan on getting *all* of my gift shopping done today, and that includes a gift for you."

I gave Jason's hand a final squeeze as I prepared to brave the crowds on my own. As our hands parted, he walked backward for a moment, smiling at me, before turning around to walk in the direction of the food court. I gave myself a shake when I realized that I was ogling him as he walked away. C'mon Xoe, focus on the task at hand.

After the first few stores, I was nearly done with my shopping, which was a great relief. I'd purchased a new purse for Allison (Allison wasn't big on my fashion sense, but I figured the big price on the tag would make up for it), an expensive, high-tech toothbrush for Lucy (it might seem like a lame gift, but Lucy was strangely obsessive

about oral hygiene, and I knew she'd like it), and I splurged on a necklace for my mom that was composed of a delicate bird pendant and thin, gold chain.

Next, I headed over to the sports store to get something soccer related for Max. As soon as I entered the colorful store, I noticed a Dallas Cowboys football jersey hanging on the wall, and felt a small twinge of sadness. They were Brian's favorite team, and this would be the first year that Brian and I wouldn't be exchanging Christmas gifts. That sadness quickly turned to anger. It wasn't my damn fault that we wouldn't be exchanging gifts. *He* was the one that stopped talking to *me*.

I quickly turned my anger into quiet determination (didn't want to blow anything up). An idea came to me. Brian might be able to keep me from talking to him, but I'd be damned if he'd keep me from buying him a Christmas present. I'd just leave it by his door sometime when he wasn't home. I could be a good friend and spite him all at the same time.

With my spirits somewhat restored, I went to the counter to get a sales guy to get the jersey down for me. The sales guy was short and blond, *so* not my type, but he seemed to think otherwise. He wasted an overly friendly smile on me as he tried to maintain eye contact. I am not a casual flirter by any means. Not only do I suck at it, it makes me horribly uncomfortable.

I pointed to the jersey I wanted and grunted something unintelligible about not being able to reach it.

Taking my discomfort for nervousness, the sales guy smiled even wider. "I wouldn't expect you to be able to reach it. It's only a good ten feet out of your reach."

He'd meant the comment to be cute, but I scowled at him in reply. An awkward silence ensued until he finally went to retrieve my jersey. While the sales guy was busy I picked out a Manchester United jersey for Max. The guy returned, obviously not trying to flirt anymore. He silently rung me up and handed me my purchases. If I were Allison, I would have flirted back and procured a discount. But I wasn't Allison, and I didn't need no stinkin' discounts.

I took my bag and turned on my heel to leave, checking my receipt before putting it in the bag. Blondie had written his phone number on it. I had to give him points for persistence.

I left the store, not looking back, and turned my thoughts to more pressing matters. The only person left for me to buy for was Jason, and I had no idea what to get him. I started walking down the mall hallway, mind preoccupied with trying to come up with something Jason would like.

As my mind was shuffling through gift options, someone walked

up behind me and grabbed my wrist. I turned, thinking it was Jason, and looked up into bright green eyes the exact color of my own. I dropped my shopping bags in surprise, causing a group of mall patrons to split up and give me a wide berth. I looked up from my fallen bags to take in the rest of the stranger that still had a hold of my wrist. He was tall, probably about 6'3", and had straight blond hair, artfully swept back off his face to almost reach his shoulders. He was dressed in a pale green, expensive looking sweater that looked bland in comparison to his eyes, along with charcoal gray slacks.

My mouth went dry, he looked . . . like me. From his narrow nose, to his somewhat full lips that looked almost out of place on his angular face, he was the male version of me.

He smiled, still holding my wrist. "It's very good to see you Alexondra."

I didn't return the smile. "Unfortunately I can't say the same."

His smile didn't falter, not one single inch. "Now, is that any way to speak to your father?"

My heart raced. He'd confirmed what I'd already figured out. I began to shake with the effort to contain the sudden anger that washed over me. I spoke slowly through gritted teeth, "Let . . go . . of . . me."

He didn't. I began to tremble almost violently. All of the pain and anger I had blocked out over the years came flooding back. He'd abandoned me. My mom had never even told me his name.

As if reading my mind, he said, "I'm going to assume that you would rather not call me dad, so you may call me Alexondre.'

Well, now I knew where I got my name, though I couldn't imagine why my mom would want to name me after someone that had abandoned her too. I took a deep breath. "Why are you here?"

"You're almost seventeen. I'm here to help you come into your powers . . . unless you already have?"

I smiled bitterly. "Yeah, you're a little late on that one. Figured it all out on my own."

He furrowed his brow as if he actually felt sorry about being late. "How late am I?"

I rolled my eyes in irritation. "Seventeen years."

"I meant how late am I on the powers? Speaking of which, stop trying to burn me. It won't work."

My eyes widened in surprise. I knew I was angry enough for it, but I didn't realize that I was trying to burn him . . . not that I felt bad for trying.

"It's that bad?" he asked, referring to my lack of control.

"Well what did you expect?" I snapped. "I didn't even know I was different until a werewolf smelled me. I had to figure out what I could

do by burning one of my friends!"

A couple walking by with a small child between them veered further away from me as they passed, sandwiching themselves closer to the child. The woman looked at me like I was crazy. Of course, I was shouting nonsense in the middle of a crowded mall, so maybe she was right.

Out of nowhere, Jason suddenly appeared beside me and grabbed Alexondre's wrist, since Alexondre was still gripping mine. Alexondre gave Jason such a look that I was surprised Jason didn't just turn into stone on the spot.

Alexondre's grip on my wrist was as strong as ever. He turned his gaze back to me. "Do you know this vampire?"

I raised my eyebrows and nodded in a 'well duh' gesture.

Alexondre slowly let go of my wrist as Jason slowly let go of his. They stood staring at each other, both of them trying to loom, though they were nearly the same height, so neither had much success.

Without looking at me, Alexondre spoke, "We need to talk Alexondra. You may have survived the beginnings of your powers on your own, but you'll need a teacher."

"Yes I do," I spoke crisply, "but it's not gonna be you."

I grabbed Jason's arm with one hand and gathered my bags with the other, then made a beeline for the door. Alexondre watched us go impassively, but didn't follow.

As soon as we were both buckled into Jason's car, he turned to me. "He's right."

"What?" I asked skeptically.

Jason avoided my gaze. "You need a teacher."

I kept my eyes looking steadily out the front window. "Not him."

"But . . . "

"Not him."

Jason let it drop. Like I said, smart man.

CHAPTER FOUR

We spent the ride home in silence. I didn't want Jason to think I was mad at him, but my mind was spinning too much for me to even think about keeping up a conversation. I hadn't expected to ever hear from my dad, let alone run into him at the mall. But there he was, in the flesh . . . or whatever he was made of.

When we got home I stormed into my house, marching straight up to my bedroom. Jason walked in a few seconds behind me, to find me sitting on my bed, already sinking into a fugue. He silently approached and sat beside me, then wrapped his arm around my lower back.

His comfort made my emotions fade from anger to hurt confusion. I looked down at my hands, not wanting to meet Jason's eyes. "She named me after him."

"His name is Alexondra?" Jason asked quizzically.

I shook my head and let out an abrupt laugh that was more of a sob. I grabbed Jason's hand where it was resting on the side of my waist and pulled it farther forward to encircle my stomach, and bring him closer to me. "Alexondre. His name's Alexondre, but it's close enough."

Jason kissed me lightly on the cheek, waiting for me to continue speaking. When I didn't, he said, "Please just consider it."

Sigh. Back to the subject of Alexondre being my teacher. I nodded slowly, knowing that he was right. "I'll try." Yeah, I'd try as hard as I tried in math class. Did I mention that I'm failing?

He took me at my word, or else he was simply letting the subject drop. "What time are you supposed to be at Lucy's?"

I looked at my *Jack Skellington* wall clock. His face was the face of the clock, and he had a little plastic body that swung back and forth in place of a pendulum. It was already close to 3:15. "Like fifteen minutes ago."

Jason gave me a final squeeze. "I'll drive you."

We went back downstairs to gather all my bags from where I had thrown them on the floor on my way in. After taking everything back up to my room, Jason drove me the short distance to Lucy's.

Jason parked in the circular, gravel driveway in front of Lucy's

two-story house. I gave him a quick kiss goodbye and hopped out of his car to walk to the front door. After knocking on the dark wood, I waited in the shade of the awning for someone to let me in. Lucy's mom opened the door a crack to see who was outside, then opened it the rest of the way when she saw that it was me.

Lucy's mom is even shorter than Lucy, about 4'11". I used to be terrified of her when I was younger. She is a very stoic woman, whose mouth is always set in a firm, unrelenting line. Her eyes, which are the same almond shape as Lucy's, regarded me with calculating interest, then turned and walked toward the kitchen, expecting me to follow.

"Nice to see you too," I mumbled to the empty air as I stepped over the threshold. I waved goodbye to Jason before shutting the door behind me and taking off my shoes. I placed them on the small square of tiling in front of the door, then headed to the kitchen.

As soon as I walked into the pristine fluorescence, I was met by a screeching seven year-old. "Xoe!" Lucy's little sister Lizzie shouted as she hurled herself at me. I lifted her up underneath her armpits and spun her in a quick circle, making her long-sleeved yellow dress flare out. Lizzie looks like a miniature Lucy: long, dark, pin-straight hair, olive skin, and almond eyes, but instead of Lucy's small, cupid's-bow mouth, she has a wide mouth always formed into a smile to split her face in half. Since Allison and I are only children, we both love being around Lucy's sister.

Lucy smiled at me from her seat at the small oak table that stood near the entrance of the kitchen. She wore a white apron over her deep purple v-neck sweater and khaki slacks to protect them from the flour and cookie frosting. Lucy's mom stood silently over the kitchen counter, rolling out some cookie dough on wax paper beside the assorted Christmas cookie cutters she had already set out. Above the cookie cutters was an array of colored frostings and sprinkles for decorating the cookies after they were baked. Lucy's mom finished her rolling and walked out of the kitchen silently. A woman of few words, was Lucy's mom.

After we had cut and baked the cookies, Lucy set Lizzie to the task of decorating at the small table, then pulled me aside. We stood in the corner of the kitchen by the clean, magnet-free refrigerator. Lizzie hummed over her cookies with her back to us, completely absorbed in her task.

I looked down at Lucy questioningly.

She held my gaze firmly with her deep brown eyes. "I have news," she whispered, licking her lips as if nervous.

I lifted my shoulders then let them down with a deep sigh. "So do I," I admitted with a matching whisper.

Lucy cocked her head curiously. “You first.”

I shook my head silently and pointed a finger at Lucy, signaling for her to start.

“Lela’s still in town.”

“What?” I whispered incredulously.

Lela had been one of Dan’s flunkies. Upon our first meeting, she had thrown Allison into a wall, then moved on to attacking me. I’d been forced to stop her with a fireplace poker to the side of her head. Lela wasn’t all bad though. Once she had been separated from Dan, she was all too eager to join our side. She had wanted rid of Dan just as much as the rest of us. “How do you know?” I whispered.

Lucy rolled her eyes. “She showed up on my doorstep this morning.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Lizzie chimed in loudly.

“Boys,” I lied.

Lizzie made a disgusted sound. “You guys are gross.”

Lucy gave me an angry look. Lucy’s mom stood by the belief that her daughters didn’t even know what boys were, and Lizzie would likely rat her out. Lucy raised her eyebrows at me, waiting for me to apologize.

I shrugged, and nodded over to Lizzie, who had duteously gone back to her cookies. I brought us back to subject. “What did she want?”

Lucy still looked a little irritated, but answered, “She says she wants to talk to you, me, and Max. She refused to say anything else until she could talk to the three of us together.”

“Why me?” I asked, confused.

“What do you mean *why you*?”

“Well, I can understand her wanting to talk to you and Max, since you’re both werewolves,” I explained, “but why would she want to talk to me?”

Lucy considered for a moment. “I don’t know, but I told her we would meet at your place at 7:00 tonight. I already called Max.”

I managed to close my gaping jaw enough to complain, “Geez, thanks a lot for filling me in.”

Lucy shook her head, brushing off my sarcasm. “What’s your news?”

“Well,” I began, “Lela’s not the only one who’s in town.”

Lucy turned away from me as her mom strode into the kitchen to silently admire Lizzie’s handiwork. When her mom left, Lucy turned back to me expectantly.

“Jason and I went to the mall today,” I explained. “We ran into my dad.”

Now it was Lucy’s delicate jaw that hung agape. “Your dad? Are

you sure? How did you know it was him?"

I looked down, no longer able to meet Lucy's gaze. "It was him, no doubt about it. We had a rather unpleasant conversation."

Lucy shook her head with disbelief. "Let's go to your place," she glanced at Lizzie, "away from prying ears."

I nodded and walked over to where Lizzie was still happily decorating cookies with Lucy following shortly behind me. In the short time she'd had to work, Lizzie had managed to cover each and every cookie with globs of multi-colored frosting, and was now covering them with a thick coating of sprinkles. Lizzie smiled up at me, showcasing the fact that about half of the frosting had gone around her mouth. Lucy sighed and started cleaning up the mess.

After we finished, Lucy and I began the short walk to my house. Lucy didn't let the silence stand for long. "So what did your dad say?"

I watched my sneakers as we walked over the faded asphalt of our street. "He wants to teach me."

"Teach you what?" Lucy cut in abruptly.

"About being a demon, and learning to control my powers."

"Oh," Lucy answered.

'Oh' was right. I still hadn't gotten any nearer to coming to terms with my feelings on the situation. I could play apathetic to things all I wanted, but in reality, I was furious with my dad. I didn't think I could stand to be around him long enough to ever forgive him for leaving my mom and me. Yet, though I hated to admit it, there was a deep down part of me that had always hoped he would come back, preferably with an excellent excuse for being MIA most of my childhood.

I huddled against the cold breeze, wishing I'd worn a jacket over my burgundy sweater, and stared out into our green surroundings. Most of the trees in Shelby are evergreens, making fall and winter much more green than in other areas. I let the silence draw on until we reached my house. My mom's car was gone, so she was either working late, or was out Christmas shopping.

Lucy and I went in through the front door and into my colorful living room. The deep green loveseat was occupied with rolls of Christmas-themed wrapping paper and ribbons that my mom had kept from last year, so Lucy sat down on the dark blue couch. A growl from my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten since breakfast, so I left her sitting there while I went into the kitchen to throw a couple of frozen pizzas into the oven.

When I came back into the living room to sit by Lucy, she gave me a serious look, a dark flush still on her face from the cold. "So what are you going to do about your dad?"

I sighed, not happy to be back on this subject. "Nothing, I guess. I

promised Jason I would at least consider letting Alexondre teach me, but . . . ”

Lucy cocked her head slightly. “His name is Alexondre?”

I nodded, waiting for her reaction.

“But . . . why would your mom give you a name so close to his? You would think after he left her alone and pregnant, she wouldn’t want any reminders of him.”

I shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. I still haven’t decided whether or not to tell my mom that he’s back, but if I want to ask her about my name, I’ll have to tell her I met him.”

Lucy shook her head slowly. “Too weird.”

“Tell me about it. Now what’s the plan for Lela?” I glanced at the grandfather-style wall clock that hung above where the TV used to be. It had luckily survived the TV’s death with only minor scorching. It was just past 6:30.

Lucy’s gaze followed mine to the clock. “I don’t know. Just hear her out I guess. Max should be here soon. He wanted to be here before Lela.”

A fast, obnoxious knock sounded at my front door. Speak of the devil.

“Come in!” I called.

Max opened the door and came striding in, shutting it gently behind him. He shucked off his light blue fleece to reveal a long-sleeved orange and yellow plaid shirt over faded jeans. Max is only about 5’4”, and his sandy blond hair, and pale green eyes, are complemented by skin that would be densely freckled if he lived somewhere with more sun. He came and squeezed between Lucy and me on the couch, then turned to Lucy. “So what’s this all about? You were so cryptic on the phone.”

Lucy shrugged. “I told you all that I know. She wanted us together before she’d say anything.”

Max looked grumpy. He often reminded me of a sullen elf, though I’d never say it to his face. He looked back and forth between Lucy and me. “I don’t like this. I don’t understand why she’s still in town.”

I had no time to placate Max, because another knock sounded at the door. This time, I got up to answer it. I walked quickly to the front door and opened it, trying to put up a front of confidence. Lela was outside in dark-wash jeans and a lavender cable knit sweater, standing a few feet back from the door as if she was afraid that I’d attack her. Given our past, her chances were about fifty-fifty.

Lela has long dark hair like Lucy’s, but Lela’s is more dense and slightly wavy. I still couldn’t quite place her ethnicity, but her deep olive skin and exotic eyes were gorgeous none-the-less, sparking jealousy in all members of the female persuasion wherever she went,

I'm sure. Yet, she was tall and willowy like me, so I couldn't hate her entirely. We curve-challenged girls got to stick together.

Behind her stood a man I didn't know, looking slightly more confident than Lela. He had nondescript brown hair, cut close to his scalp, that blended into his tanned skin, only a few shades lighter than the hair. I placed him around Lela's age, which I guessed was 22 or 23. The last time I saw her she'd been in wolf form, so I'd never gotten the chance to ask.

The stranger was wearing the universal bad-boy uniform: black leather jacket over white t-shirt, and black leather boots covered by faded jeans. He aimed a crooked flirtatious smile at me. I mistrusted him instantly.

I stepped back from the door and gestured for them to come inside, which they did after a moment's hesitation from Lela. I shut the door and left Lela and the mystery man standing while I cleared the wrapping paper and ribbons off the loveseat. I put them in a pile on the multicolored patchwork rug that dominates my living room floor. Lela stepped forward slowly.

I sat back on the couch with Max and Lucy and gestured to the loveseat. "Have a seat."

Lela walked around the far side of the loveseat and sat down, folding her delicate hands in her lap. She then proceeded to stare at said hands and not say a word. The man came to sit casually beside Lela, slumping in his seat as if he hadn't a care in the world.

I looked at Lela, confused. "Well?"

Lela finally met my eyes. "I have a proposition for the three of you."

A proposition? I had a feeling I wasn't going to like this. She had fallen silent again so I waved my hands in a 'go on' gesture.

Lela took a deep breath and let it out, her full lips trembling slightly. "I think we should form a pack."

"Really?" Max asked, at the same time as Lucy said, "What?"

I was too stumped to speak.

Lela elaborated. "If we have a pack, we'll be safe. If another rogue wolf like Dan comes through and tries to bother us, we can call the Pack Coalition for help."

"The Pack Coalition?" Lucy asked at the same time I asked, "We?"

Lela was gaining confidence as she spoke. "You remember Abel, Dan's old pack leader? Well, he's also the leader of the Western Pack Coalition. The leader or alpha of each pack attends three Coalition meeting per year. They get together and discuss any news or problems, confirm pack size, and fill out paperwork for any new pack members."

"How do you know all of this?" I asked.

Lela brought her gaze back to me. “I traveled to Utah to talk to Abel, shortly after the Dan incident. I wanted to get my facts straight before I approached you.”

Max squinted thoughtfully. “So, what you’re saying is that if we form a pack, we’re protected by this Coalition thingy?”

Lela nodded excitedly. “Pretty much. I mean, we have to do our part too. We pay dues, and if a wolf comes into our area and needs help, we have to help them, just as they would have to help us if we were in their area, which leads me to Nick.” She gestured to the smiling man beside her who gave me a sarcastic wave in return.

“I met him a few weeks ago in California, while I was on my way back here,” Lela went on. “He’s basically in the same situation as the rest of us: no pack, easy picking for any rogue wolf trying to recruit underlings.”

“This all sounds great,” Lucy announced with a smile, surprising me. “Ever since the Dan incident, I’ve been constantly looking over my shoulder for the next rogue wolf to come and try to take Max and me away.”

Max was nodding excitedly. “I agree. I’m in.”

I looked at Max and Lucy like they had sprouted second heads. “You’re seriously going to trust her, just like that?”

Lucy had the grace to look slightly embarrassed while Max answered. “She helped us before when she could have just run off, and she was just as much a victim as any of us.”

I glanced at Nick, wishing I didn’t have to speak in front of him, but unwilling to wait until Lucy and Max had already agreed to something they might regret. “What about him?” I asked. “You don’t even know him. He could be another Dan just waiting to pounce.”

Max turned and narrowed his eyes at Nick. “That’s true . . . but there are three of us and one of him.”

I shook my head and retreated from the conversation. It really wasn’t my choice to make.

Sensing my defeat, Lela smiled from ear to ear. Yet, there was something I still wasn’t getting. I had a feeling I didn’t want to know the answer, but I couldn’t help asking, “So why did you want to talk to me?”

Lela’s smile faltered slightly. “Well . . . we need an alpha.”

I raised my eyebrows. “And?”

“And we need you to be that alpha,” she said quickly, still fearing my reaction. Hit someone in the head with a fireplace poker one time and they never get over it.

I closed my eyes in frustration. I had enough problems to deal with, demonic and otherwise. I did not need wolf ones. “Why can’t one of you be the alpha? This has nothing to do with me.”

Before Lela could answer, the oven timer went off. I held up a finger to delay her answer further so I could get up and get the pizzas out of the oven. I left them on top of the stove and went back to sit in the living room again. As I sat, I twirled my hand to end palm up in Lela's direction, sarcastically signaling her to answer my question.

Lela shifted in her seat, looking slightly embarrassed. "We don't qualify as alphas. None of us is strong enough."

I huffed out my breath in confusion. "And I am? I'm not even a wolf!" I was up and standing in front of Lela before I even realized it. I made myself stop and take a deep breath to keep from losing control. My temper was beginning to get ridiculous. Just another wonderful thing I could thank my dad for.

Lela waited a moment for me to calm down before she continued in the soft type of voice that's perfect for talking to crazy people. I'd been hearing that voice a lot lately. "You killed Dan," she began, "who was technically a pack leader, even though he was rogue. It qualifies you."

"Max helped," I said weakly as I let myself drop back down onto the couch. Max had thrown a can of gasoline on Dan to prevent the fire I had started from going out.

Lela shook her head. "Abel credits the killing to you. He's the one that has to approve our alpha. He approved you, and *only* you."

"What about *Nick*?" I asked snarkily, causing his annoying smile to falter.

"Doesn't qualify," Lela answered matter-of-factly, ignoring Nick's annoyed expression. I had a feeling Nick didn't enjoy admitting that a girl might be more powerful than him.

Lucy and Max turned to me expectantly.

I didn't like that Abel wanted me to become a pack member. The money in the mail was weird enough. It was beginning to seem like he had ulterior motives, though I had no idea what they might be. I took a deep breath. Best not to think it over too much. I'd only talk myself out of it. If Max and Lucy *really* thought this would make them safe, then I wanted it. "I'll do it."

Lela squealed and leapt off the loveseat onto the couch to hug me awkwardly. "Thank you," she whispered, and I realized she had started to cry. I couldn't blame her; she'd had a rough year.

I patted her back awkwardly, not really sure what to do. Finally, she pulled herself together and climbed off me. She stood slowly, wiping at her eyes with the lavender sleeve of her sweater. "Mind if I use your bathroom?"

I forced a smile that was probably more of a sneer. "Sure. Down the hall, first door on the left." I pointed to show her the way.

As Lela started toward the bathroom, Lucy leaned across Max's lap

to pull me into a hug, which pretty much forced Max to join the hugging too.

Lucy ended the hug and settled back into her seat and smiled. “I feel so much better. No more worrying.” Lucy paused for a minute, then went on, “and thanks Xoe. I know you don’t want to do this.”

I felt the fake smile fall from my lips. No, I did not want to do this. “Let’s not get too excited yet. We still have to find out what forming a pack actually entails.”

Nick sat silently, taking it all in with a slightly bemused smile on his face. He obviously didn’t know me very well to be so at ease. I met his smile with one of my own. “I’m not in the business of trusting people these days,” I began. “Just to make things clear, if you betray me or my friends, I’ll kill you.”

So it was an empty threat, but wiping that smile off his face brightened my mood considerably. And who really knew how empty it was? These days I was never sure of much, especially in concerns to myself.

Lela came back out of the bathroom as I was smiling sweetly at Nick. She sat back down on the loveseat. After taking in Nick’s sick expression, she slowly turned to me. “I, um, have all of the paperwork for us to fill out. Then all we have to do is go to the next Coalition meeting. Normally only Xoe would need to go, but Abel wants us all there for the first time.”

I hadn’t had a chance to think about the Coalition meetings. “Where are the meetings held?”

Lela shrugged. “The Coalition chooses a different state for each meeting, so that some pack leaders don’t have to travel more than others. The next one will be in Utah with Abel’s pack.”

I cringed. “So I have to travel to these meetings three times a year?”

Lela shook her head. “You can send a member of your pack as your proxy to two of them. You’re only required to physically attend one meeting per year. I’d be happy to go myself to the other ones.”

“But I’m not eighteen,” I argued. “Can I even buy a plane ticket?”

“I’ve already started looking for a job. I’m willing to foot the bill for travel, and for pack dues. I’ll buy the ticket for you. It’s worth it for me.”

Good to know, though it wasn’t really the money aspect that concerned me. I was going to have a heck of a time convincing my mom to let me fly somewhere without her. “When is the Utah meeting?”

“The end of January. I’m not sure of the exact date.”

I sighed. That was *soon*. I had the travel money from Abel’s payment, but I’d keep that to myself for now. I wanted as little

involvement in all this as possible. Plus, going to a pack meeting was bad enough without having to pay for it. The only remaining problem was what to tell my mom so that she'd let me go. Lucy would have even more trouble than I would. I turned and raised my eyebrows at her.

Her eyes were pinched with worry. "I'll figure it out," she said, understanding my silent question.

I let it drop. I didn't think it likely that she'd 'figure it out,' but I couldn't stop her from trying. My thoughts were interrupted by another knock on the door.

I sighed heavily and got up to answer it, wondering who it could be now. I opened the door, then slammed it closed again. My dad was outside. A quick, loud knock sounded at the door again. I considered just walking away, but grudgingly re-opened it. I took in my dad for the second time in the day and in my life, waiting patiently in his pale green sweater and dark gray slacks. It had gotten dark, and the sweater was a little thin for how cold it was outside, but he seemed unfazed by it. I raised my eyebrows in question and waited for him to explain his presence.

"We need to talk," he said simply.

I sighed loudly, making sure he took in my exasperation. "Kinda busy right now . . . "

"This cannot wait," he replied sharply, brushing a strand of his blond hair out of his face in agitation. "You may be in danger."

I squared my body to face him defensively. "Are you threatening me?"

He sighed, and it sounded so much like my sigh that it gave me goosebumps. "Not in the least, but we need to talk. *Now*."

I knew I was going to regret it, but I stood aside and gestured for him to come in. He gave a startled nod, as if he hadn't expected the invitation, then stepped into my house, leaving the door open behind him. He looked around my living room, as if he were taking in every little detail. His eyes stopped on Lucy, Max, Nick, and Lela. "These are your potential wolves?" he asked.

My eyes widened. "How did you know?"

He shrugged and said simply, "Abel is a friend. He informed me of his plans to involve you in his world."

I was becoming very tired of Abel. The wolves in my living room stayed where they were sitting and waited with identical expressions on their faces: mild curiosity, with an edge of tension in response to the possible danger. It still creeped me out to see Lucy that way.

I turned back to my dad. "What did you mean about me being in danger?" There, that sounded nice and steady. Xoe, large and in charge.

“When Abel contacted me this morning to tell me of the possibility of you becoming a pack leader,” he began, “he also informed me that several wolves throughout California have gone missing. One has been found dead. I did some research and found three other missing persons cases, two in California, and one in Oregon. Upon further investigation, I realized that all three were alleged supernaturals: two witches and a merperson.”

“Well aren’t you a regular Nancy Drew,” I said snarkily.

“Pay attention Alexondra,” he replied sharply, sounding too much like a parent for someone who hadn’t actually lived the role. “We don’t know who’s doing this.”

I cocked my head, thinking, but my brain wasn’t letting me put two and two together. “What does this have to do with me?”

My dad rolled his eyes. “Someone is abducting, and likely killing, supernatural beings. They worked their way up California, and have now moved on to Oregon.”

“And you don’t know who’s doing it?” I asked, trying to buy myself some time to think.

“If I knew,” he said bluntly, “they would have already been stopped.”

Before I could process what ‘stopping’ them implied, I was distracted by movement at the front door. “Alex?” a small voice questioned.

My dad and I both spun, seeking the source of the voice. My mom was standing in the doorway, dressed in her khaki trench coat and dark brown, low-heeled boots. As soon as my dad fully faced her, she dropped her purse and shopping bags to the ground and stood flabbergasted, jaw agape.

“Hello Libby,” my dad said calmly, slightly bowing his head in greeting.

My mom stormed into the living room. “Get . . . out! Get out! Get out! Get out!”

My dad just stood there for a moment, then walked right out the front door, not loosing a single iota of his calm. He shut the front door gently behind him. My mom stared at the door, stunned. Lucy, Max, Nick and Lela were glued to their seats, looking more like frightened lambs than big bad wolves.

My mom turned horrified eyes to me. “What was he doing here Xoe?”

“I’ll explain in a minute,” I answered. “Would you please wait upstairs for me?”

My mom nodded, acting more like a child than a mother, no arguing whatsoever. She must have been seriously freaked. I turned away as the sound of her boots clicked hurriedly up the stairs. The

four wolves stood. Lucy came forward and gave me a quick hug. “We should go. We’ll talk more about everything later.”

I nodded numbly. “I’ll walk you out.”

As we walked out of my house I saw that my dad was still waiting outside, haloed by my front porch light. With the light reflecting off his pale skin and hair, he looked like some sort of solemn angel, but I definitely knew better than that. The only car outside was my mom’s, so Lela, Nick, and Max had all apparently walked to my house, or maybe Max had a ride, he lived several miles away. Whatever. The four of them walked together down the street toward Lucy’s house, though where Max and Nick would go, I didn’t know. I realized that I didn’t know where Lela was staying either, then realized that, at the moment, I didn’t really care. I had bigger problems.

My dad walked up to stand beside me while I watched everyone else go. I stifled a shiver at the feeling of his presence so near. Once again the only car outside was my mom’s, so my dad had apparently walked too. Or maybe he just went ‘poof’ and appeared at my door. I was betting on the latter. I just couldn’t picture him strolling down my quaint neighborhood street. Plus, his expensive loafers were definitely not meant for extended outdoor travel.

Once my friends were out of sight, he turned to regard me. “You need protection.”

I kept my eyes focused on the now empty dark street. “Since when do you care?” I asked tiredly.

Ignoring my question he spoke again. “You should refuse the Pack Leader position. You don’t understand how wolves can be, what the meetings will be like. It’s a very *different* type of society.”

I shrugged in reply, not caring to have his opinion on the subject.

He was silent for several minutes. “I’ll be sending someone to watch over you.” With that, he walked a few steps toward the street. He spoke without turning to face me. “I didn’t leave by choice, you know.”

Then he really did go ‘poof’, well it was more of a whoosh, leaving a cloud of smoke in his wake. I wasn’t even surprised. That tells you just how weird the past few months had been for me.

CHAPTER FIVE

I wasn't looking forward to what I had to do next, but my mom was waiting patiently for me upstairs. I stood alone in my driveway and debated whether or not I could just follow in the direction Lucy, Max, Nick, and Lela had gone. With a sigh, I turned dutifully on my heel and marched back into my house, locking the door behind me. I kept my forward momentum and marched straight upstairs and down the hall to my mom's room.

I stood and took a deep breath before I pushed her bedroom door open and stepped into the dark red and purple themed interior. She was curled up on her burgundy bedspread with her back to me, still in her beige trench coat. Her face was hidden by waves of her brown hair. I sat beside her on the bed and waited for her to speak.

"What's going on Xoe?" she asked without looking at me.

I paused before speaking. I had a feeling that it was a mistake to let her in on everything, but it would also make life a little less complicated. "There are some things you need to know, but I have one question first."

My mom rolled onto her other side and looked up at me with her honey brown eyes puffy from crying. She waited for the question, not saying anything.

Here goes. "Why am I named after him? If dad left before I was born, why would you give me a name so similar to his?"

My mom looked down at her bed and started tracing her finger across the subtle embroidery on her comforter. For a moment I thought she wasn't going to answer, then she finally replied, "I'll tell you the truth, then you'll tell me everything?"

I nodded, then realized my mom was so intent on her bedspread that she didn't notice. "Yes." I replied as I lowered myself to sit on the bed beside her.

My mom took in a deep breath and let it out. "Your dad didn't leave until shortly after your first birthday."

My jaw dropped, she'd always told me he left when he found out she was pregnant. "What?"

My mom finally met my eyes. "And it wasn't his choice, exactly."

I crossed my arms and waited for her to elaborate.

She grabbed my hand, forcing it back down by my side. “It was in the early spring,” she began. “I took you to the park, and your dad was going to meet us there. We were going to have a picnic. It was still pretty cold out, so we were the only ones there. I had you in your stroller and we were waiting near the parking lot for your dad to show up. There was a man and he . . . he ran up behind me and grabbed my purse.” She paused, eyes staring as if she was seeing the scene played before her eyes. “I should have just let him take it,” she said quickly. “But . . . I don’t know why, I held on. He pushed your stroller over to distract me.”

When she stopped speaking I squeezed her hand a little tighter and waited for her to go on.

After a shuddering breath, she continued, “Out of nowhere, your dad appeared. He hadn’t pulled up in his car, he was just *there*. He righted the stroller and made sure you were okay. You had started crying as soon as your stroller was pushed over. Yet you stopped the second your dad got there, even before he picked the stroller up. You had been connected to your dad like that since birth. You never cried around him.”

“What happened after dad got there?” I prompted, noticing her subtle attempt to end the story.

My mom was silent for a moment, her face completely blank. Finally she went on. “He went after the attacker. The man just stood gaping at your dad, probably wondering where he had come from. When the attacker realized your dad’s intent, he turned to run, but your dad knocked him down and was just suddenly on him. I just watched. I didn’t know what to do. Your dad wrapped his hands around the man’s throat. I smelled this horrible burning smell.”

Her voice had faded so that I could barely hear her. I had to lean my head right by her face to hear what she said next. “A few seconds later your dad stood and turned to face me. He told me not to look, but . . . the man’s neck was just gone, reduced to ash.”

“Ash?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “I know it sounds crazy, but that’s what I saw. I tried to tell myself that my mind was playing tricks on me, but I’ve never been able to wipe the memory away.”

“What happened next?” I asked.

“I grabbed you out of your stroller and ran. It was stupid of me, but I didn’t even put you in your car seat. I held you in my lap while I drove home, then I went inside and locked all of the doors, only to realize that your dad was already inside the house. He had somehow gotten there before me. I told him to get out, that I never wanted to see him again. He had *killed* a man. Your dad left, but he said he’d come back once I had calmed down. As soon as he was gone, I packed

a few things, took you, and left." She took another shuddering breath. "Today was the first time I've seen him since that day."

"So you left him because he killed a guy?" I prompted.

She breathed in and seemed to mentally gather herself before she explained. "That was only part of it. I mean, I was of course horrified by that fact, but I also feared the consequences of your dad's actions. What if there was an investigation? A dead man in a park with his throat burnt away would raise more than a few eyebrows. Plus, I had to wonder what else your dad had done that I didn't know about. Maybe if it was just me I would have stayed to find out, but I felt I was protecting you. I had no idea what else he might be capable of, or if he was even . . . human."

Okay, I just had to ask. "What did the police think…you know, when they found the body?"

My mom shrugged as a few more tears fell down her face. "I checked the papers for months. The body was never found. That fact alone helped me stay strong in my decision."

I raised my eyebrows in question.

"Your dad must have gotten rid of the body," she explained. "He could have covered up so many other things. I'm not sure I really ever knew him at all."

I felt a little sick thinking of the Dan incident, and how I could actually relate to what my dad had done. I couldn't really throw stones at someone for being involved in covering up a murder.

Not noticing my reverie, my mom wrapped up her explanation. "And that's it, that's why you never knew your father. As time passed, I stopped thinking about him as much. I focused all of my attention on you."

It was a lot to take in, but it made sense. I finally knew why my dad had left us, or, I guess, why we left him. "Were you guys married?"

"No. We had planned on it. We had a date set and everything."

"Oh," I replied. So he hadn't run scared when my mom dropped the news of her pregnancy on him. He had planned to stay.

My mom sat up and leaned her back against her headboard, then put her arm around my shoulders and drew me over to sit right beside her. She gave her body a shake and settled back in, as if casting away the residue of her past experience. I wished I could do that.

"Now," my mom said, "your turn."

"Okay," I began, "not really sure where to start."

"Start with why your dad was here. He is gone, isn't he?"

I laughed. "Yeah, he's gone, for now."

My mom let out a nervous chuckle. "Good. Now explain."

I turned toward my mom to give her direct eye contact, so she'd

know I was serious. “Dad’s a demon.”

My mom squinted her eyes in confusion. “I’ll admit, the man has his faults, but calling him a demon is a little harsh. I’ve come to terms with the fact that what he did to that man, he did to protect us. Even if I can’t fully accept what he did, or even understand *how* he did it, I know *why* he did it.”

I sighed. “No. I mean he’s actually a demon, like a magical . . . being. You said it yourself that you questioned whether he was even human.”

My mom raised her eyebrows at me skeptically, but her eyes were uncertain. Her face slowly fell into worried lines. “The combusting appliances?”

I nodded my head and pointed a finger at my chest. “Half-demon.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied. “I mean I do,” she went on. “I of course always suspected something of your dad, ever since that day. But a demon? Like from Hell?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know the exact details of where demons come from, but think less like Heaven and Hell, and more like legends and monsters.”

My mom held a hand up to her eyes and shook her head. “This is ridiculous. Your dad is *not* a demon. He’s obviously filled your head with nonsense.”

“I *am* a demon mom,” I argued. “I’d light something on fire right now if I were actually able to control it.”

She suddenly looked angry. “Stop it, Xoe. No matter what he told you, you’re not a demon.”

“I am!” I shouted, feeding off her sudden anger.

There was a crashing sound behind me, followed by a woosh of flame. My mom screamed, and I hopped off to see the lamp that rested on her bedside table shattered, with its remnants somehow aflame. I grabbed a pillow off her bed and snuffed out the flame, then turned back to my mom as I tried to regain my breath.

She stared at me in awe.

“I told you so,” I said sullenly.

She started crying again. “I’m losing my mind,” she muttered.

I sat back down on the bed and hesitantly touched her shoulder.

She slumped beneath my touch, and seemed unable to meet my eyes. “I’m going to need some time to process this,” she said finally.

I almost left it at that, but I figured it would be better to get it all out now . . . better for me at least. I took one of her hands in mine. “There’s more.”

My mom whipped her head around to face me again. “More?” she asked hysterically.

Okay, just had to say it all, then get out. She could deal with the

information how she wanted. She'd just have to get over it . . . ri-ght. "Lucy and Max are werewolves," I said quickly. "And Jason's a vampire. Okay bye." I got up to rush for the door, then realized that my mom hadn't let go of my hand.

She yanked me back to the bed. "*What* did you say?"

I smiled nervously and tried in vain to free my hand.

My mom turned frightened eyes to me. "Are they . . . dangerous?"

"No," I answered quickly, feeling relief that she was readily believing me this time, then corrected myself, "well, not really. Not any more dangerous than I am."

"N-now," she stammered, "when you say, um, *vampire,* what do you mean?"

I shrugged wanting nothing more than to run out of the room. "Like, well, I actually mean vampire. Think Dracula with a few minor tweaks."

My mom lifted her free hand to press against her eyes again. "I don't see how that's possible. I mean, you and your . . . father, well, that's one thing, but a vampire? I've seen him in sunlight, and he doesn't look dead. I've seen him eat food."

I squirmed a bit at that. I didn't like to think of Jason as a dead guy. Me squeamish? Never. "Well, he did kind of die," I explained, "but it's not like he's actually dead, and he has no problem being in sunlight."

My mom suddenly removed her hand from her eyes and turned to face me. "*Please* don't tell me that he drinks your blood."

I cringed, yet another thing I didn't like to think about in regards to Jason. "Animal blood actually," I corrected. I decided to leave out the part about him sometimes drinking blood from blood banks.

My mom was looking in my direction, but seemed to be staring past me. "Well *that's* reassuring. Have you ever seen him drink it?"

I shook my head, confused. "I'd rather not."

"Well then how do you know he's a vampire?" she countered, meeting my eyes again.

Oh. I sighed. She was in the second stage of denial: grasping at straws. "He is," I confirmed.

My mom's face crumpled back into worried lines. "And . . . werewolves? How can little Lucy be a werewolf?"

"She got scratched," I replied matter-of-factly.

"By what, er, um, who?" she asked skeptically.

"It's not important," I blurted. "He's gone now."

"Define 'gone,'" my mom ordered.

"He's *gone,*" I said with meaning.

My mom shook her head quickly. "Nevermind. I don't want to know. Is that everything?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah, that’s all. So do you believe me?”

She was silent for several second before answering. “I believe that you believe what you’re telling me, and I believe that you just set my lamp on fire, but I can’t believe anything else. I just *can’t*.”

She loosened her grip on my hand and stared off into space. “I’m going to have more questions about all of this stuff you think you know, but that’s about all I can take for now,” she said numbly. “We’ll talk more later.”

I got up to leave, feeling defeated, but relieved that I’d at least tried to tell her. I paused at the door and turned to face my mom again. “I, um, still have some pain killers from when I broke my arm. I didn’t really use them, but they’re supposed to knock you out pretty good . . . ”

My mom raised an eyebrow, lending expression to her otherwise blank stare. “Why didn’t you take them?”

“Um,” I began, not really sure how to explain. “I kind of healed a little faster than I let on.”

My mom’s mouth formed into a little *o* of understanding.

“So, do you want them?” I asked again.

She kept her gaze straight ahead and answered, “Yes please.”

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as my mom was dead to the world, I headed to my room, utterly exhausted. What a day.

I opened my bedroom door to find Jason patiently waiting on my bed. He'd probably come in through the window. I walked in, shutting the door behind me, then plopped down beside him on my dark green comforter. As soon as I sat, I let my back fall to the bed, swinging my arms over my head with an exaggerated sigh. Jason followed suit.

We stayed lying silently with our legs hanging off the bed, and that's a lot of legs, with me at 5'8", and Jason at 6'2". Suddenly Jason spoke, "I saw Brian outside."

"And?" I prompted. Brian was my next-door neighbor after all, there was nothing unusual about seeing him, and Jason knew I didn't like to talk about him.

"He said you were with some guy that disappeared into thin air."

"That was my dad," I answered. "So Brian actually talked to you?"

"Yes," he answered plainly, but didn't go on.

"Well?" I urged. "What else did he say?"

Jason cleared his throat uncomfortably. "He said to keep that weird stuff behind closed doors."

"Why that little . . . " I began.

"What else has happened since I left you at Lucy's?" Jason interrupted.

He was right to interrupt. I had to avoid getting mad . . . for now. Once I had control of my powers though, Brian had a thing or two comin'. I pushed Brian to the back of my mind and gathered my thoughts to explain things to Jason.

I took in a deep breath. This would be a long speech. "Well, Lela's still in town, along with another werewolf, which has somehow resulted in me becoming the leader of a werewolf pack. My dad, as you know, showed up at my front door, shortly followed by my mom, who, of course, was a bit shocked. My dad says that we're all in danger, because someone is abducting and killing supernatural beings. I finally had to fill my mom in on everything. Well, everything except the possibility of abduction. She's got enough to worry about already."

Jason turned his head toward me and raised his eyebrows. "You

told her *everything*?"

I nodded my head while still lying down, making my hair go static-y from my bedspread. "Yep, all about my werewolf pack, vampire boyfriend, and demon dad."

Jason cringed. "Does she hate me now?"

I shrugged, not able to care too much right at that moment. "She was kind of in shock I think, and I don't think she believed me about most of it. I accidentally blew up her lamp, so she had to at least believe me about my powers. Only time will tell how she's going to take everything."

Jason nodded, then grabbed my hand and gave it a tight squeeze. "And she never knew what your dad was?"

"Well, she suspected something, and that reminds me of my other news. My mom always told me that my dad left before I was born. Turns out, he stayed past my first birthday, and he didn't choose to go. My mom and I left him. Of course, I still hate him. He could have at least tried to find us, rather than just accepting my mom's decision." I hesitated and glanced at Jason when I realized I was babbling.

I scooted over to lay my head on Jason's chest and he wrapped his arm around me obligingly. "You have had quite a day," he said softly.

I sighed. "Tell me about it."

Jason chuckled softly and began stroking my hair. "Now, how on earth have you become the leader of a wolf pack?"

I got started on that confusing explanation, including a brief rant on the existence of Nick. We talked things over for several hours, then at some point I fell asleep. I woke up underneath my comforter with my head on one of my yellow pillows. I could feel the press of Jason's body against my back.

"Morning," he said, as he sensed that I was awake.

Jason doesn't sleep. It's a vampire thing. He stays over a lot (unbeknownst to my mom), and usually lies with me all night. I once asked him if he ever got bored and he admitted that I talk in my sleep a lot. I let the subject drop before he could tell me all of the likely embarrassing things I say.

I rolled over to face him. "I better check on my mom."

He nodded. "I am going to stop by my apartment. Do you want me to come back afterward?"

"Well duh." I answered.

Before I knew it, he had kissed my cheek and was out the window. I realized I was still dressed in my burgundy sweater and jeans, with my hair plastered to the side of my head. I decided to take a quick shower before I faced my mom again.

Once I had dried off and fixed my hair, I dressed in black jeans and

a long-sleeved v-neck shirt that was so dark a shade of blue, it almost matched the jeans. My clothes represented my mood perfectly.

I walked out of my room and down the hall to my mom's door. I knocked once.

No answer.

"Mom?" I called.

Still no answer.

I waited a moment more, then twisted the knob and walked in. My mom's bed was made and she was nowhere to be seen. I left her room and went downstairs to check the rest of the house. Empty. Her car was gone from the driveway.

There was a half-pot of coffee waiting for me in the kitchen. I gratefully filled a cup and took a sip. It tasted burned, letting me know it had been made hours ago. I sat at the pale wood dining room table and sipped my burned coffee, not really sure whether or not I should be worried. She had taken her car, so it was hopefully safe to say that no one had taken her. Then it dawned on me. Duh, she had gone to work. I was so preoccupied with worry about how she would act today, that I completely forgot that she'd be at work.

Laughing over my stupidity, I got up and made some toast with butter and orange marmalade, then sat back down to wait for Jason. After a few minutes, I heard the crunch of tires on the gravel of my driveway, and got up to let Jason in. I smiled as I opened the door to see him standing there in faded jeans, a green flannel shirt, and hiking boots. He could clean up quite nicely when the need arose, but outdoor casual was his normal mode of dress. I gave him a quick kiss hello, then led him back to the dining room table so I could finish my toast.

"You want anything to eat?" I asked as we sat down.

He shook his head. "I ate at my apartment, thanks."

I briefly wondered what he had eaten. I knew that he had to drink animal blood occasionally to survive, but I had never thoroughly discussed it with him. I was fine with not having the details on that unsettling tidbit.

"Where is your mom?" He asked.

"Work," I answered casually, as if I had known all along.

He opened his mouth in an *o* of realization. Apparently he had forgotten too. He quickly schooled his expression and cleared his throat to hide his lack of foresight. "What is on our agenda today?"

"Well," I began between bites of toast. "I'm assuming Lela will be back sometime today with the paperwork I need to fill out. She seemed pretty anxious to get the ball rolling. I'm sure my dad and/or his proxy will show up at some point too."

Jason raised his eyebrows in question. "Proxy?"

I nodded, then spoke around another bite of toast. “Yeah, he said he’d be sending someone to *watch over me*.” I wiggled my fingers in mock spookiness.

Jason gave me his crooked half-smile. “Sounds ominous.”

I nodded while I took a sip of bitter coffee. “Tell me about it.”

He sunk down into his chair. “So all we have to do is wait?”

“Or,” I smiled mischievously. “We could go hiking, and ignore all of the impending doom.”

Jason put out his hand for me to shake. “You have got yourself a deal.”

I shook his hand then stood to take my plate and empty coffee mug to the kitchen sink. I left a note for my mom by the phone, just in case she came home for lunch. Then I went to sit by the backdoor to swap my sneakers for my worn in, dark brown hiking boots. As I was lacing up my boots I could hear Jason rummaging through my kitchen for some snacks to bring with and I smiled. Avoiding responsibility is so much more fun when you have someone to conspire with. Hopefully we could make it an all day hike.

Jason walked toward me as I stood up from tying my shoes, his hands and arms full of snacks and several bottles of water. I took my dark green hiking backpack off the hook on the wall and held it open for him to dump everything into. The backpack was already equipped with first aid equipment and pepper spray, so we were ready to go. I guess if an enemy was willing to take on a vampire and a half-demon, they probably wouldn’t hesitate at the sight of pepper spray, but it still made me feel safe. Ridiculous, but true.

Jason took the backpack from me and swung it over his shoulder as we walked out the backdoor. I locked the door behind us, then made Jason stand still so I could put my keys into the backpack.

We started up the trail that begins shortly after my backyard ends, and I instantly felt better. Like magic, the woods took custody of the weight of all of my predicaments. Sadly, they would still be waiting for me when I got back.

Jason turned to me as we walked up the path. “Which trail do you want to take?”

Shelby is full of hiking trails, three of which stem right from my backyard, though you could access them from other paths. “Waterfalls?” I asked.

Jason nodded merrily and took the trail that led off to the left. It was my favorite trail. It led up to a series of waterfalls. Not like, big rainforest type of waterfalls, more the type you find along a babbling brook. The waterfalls are near the stone remnants of several old, dirt-floor houses. They basically just form partial walls now, the roofs long-since disintegrated.

We walked in a comfortable silence, birdsong and the distant running water the only sounds to accompany our footsteps. As we walked farther uphill, the trail became more narrow and the trees more dense. The trail up to the waterfalls isn't used very often, don't ask me why. I guess people just didn't know about it.

It took us about an hour to reach the first of the old houses. It was a mile or so below the waterfalls and the other less dilapidated structures. Jason went and sat on one crumbled wall that was little more than a few stones stacked on top of each other, and gestured for me to sit beside him. As I sat he swung the backpack down from his shoulder to dig out the water bottles. He turned to me with a fake smile plastered on his face and I immediately knew that something was wrong. His eyes scanned our surroundings as he faced me.

"Don't look now," he said almost inaudibly, "but someone's watching us."

I, of course, immediately turned my head in search of our anonymous watcher. I caught movement from the corner of my eye as someone ducked behind a bush about thirty feet away from where we were sitting. Jason gave my knee a squeeze, then slowly rose to investigate.

I tried to pretend that nothing was happening, and started rummaging through the backpack until my fingers wrapped around my pepper spray. Once again, yes, I am a half-demon and shouldn't need pepper spray, but my powers aren't exactly reliable, so pepper spray it was.

I watched Jason out of the corner of my eye as he walked slowly to where I had seen the movement. He walked casually amongst the trees with his hands clasped behind his back. Just a harmless human strolling through the woods. Ri-ight.

The scuffle sounded again to my right. It was getting closer to me. Jason turned his head at the sound and changed his course to move toward it. I stood and began to approach the area where the scuffle had sounded, with the intention of trapping who or whatever it was between Jason and me.

My heart pounded in my ears as we both drew closer to the cluster of bushes where we thought the sound had come from. I stopped a few feet away from the first bush and waited for Jason to catch up. He looked irritated that I had involved myself in the situation. A bit over-protective at times, was my Jason.

Suddenly, a man leapt from where he had been crouching several feet to the right of where I had been looking. I caught a glimpse of a green jacket and dark hair before he turned on his heel to run away through the woods.

Jason whooshed by me in a blur of motion, hot on the man's heels.

I blinked slowly, shocked at how fast it had all happened, then set off in the direction Jason had gone, pepper spray gripped tightly in one sweaty palm.

I had already lost sight of the man as well as Jason, so I was basically running blind. The trees in the area were so dense that I couldn't see more than twenty feet ahead of me. Knowing that there was no way that I'd catch up to Jason, especially with all the roots and vegetation I was tripping on, I veered left toward the trail. Hopefully the un-obscured path would allow me to catch up.

After several more minutes of stumbling through the dense forest, I reached the narrow trail leading back down the mountain. I hurled myself forward, despite the burning sensation building in my lungs. I continued sprinting down the trail for what seemed like a good ten minutes, but was probably only about three, until I finally had to stop and catch my breath. I hunched over with my hands on my knees and tried to suck in enough air. I couldn't hear anything over the pounding of my heart.

I crouched down into a squat to wait. It had been stupid of me to take a chance and veer from the direction Jason had taken. Now he could be anywhere, left to fight our nameless watcher on his own. I stood up and decided to cut through the woods to my right, then make my way back to where I had left my backpack. The going was much slower when avoiding trees, so if I was lucky and they hadn't passed me, I might run into them on my way up.

I stumbled along through the vegetation, feeling increasingly unsure of my choice to go back. It would probably have made more sense to go home and call the police, but if our watcher was something supernatural, it was better to not get them involved.

There is an unspoken rule for supernatural beings. It's mainly governed over by the werewolves since they're the most organized. It states that supernatural matters are to be handled within the supernatural community. There are the occasional slip-ups that often result in sensational news stories, but for the most part, we keep things quiet.

My legs still burned from all of the running and my pace began to lag as I navigated my way through the trees. All I could see was quiet, moist vegetation and damp earth where the sun couldn't penetrate the trees. I noticed that my hiking boot was untied. I crouched down in the damp soil on one knee to tie it. I began to reach for the laces, then paused as the sound of hurried footsteps thudded toward me. I turned just in time to see our nameless watcher, who was looking back over his shoulder as he ran.

I tried to stand and move out of the way, but my reaction was too slow, and he barreled right into me. We both went flying downhill in

a tangled mass. We rolled a few times, each of us trying to pin the other. I couldn't for the life of me remember how to burn him. I'd only burned someone once before, and that had been an accident. The one I lit on fire hadn't exactly been accidental, but I still had no idea how I'd done it.

I had lost my pepper spray somewhere during our fall and cursed my bad luck. I struggled in the mud and leaves against our watcher, realizing in horror that he was gaining the upper hand. His greater weight continued to his advantage as he finally managed to pin my arms to the ground while he straddled me to hold my body down. He was obviously something other than human, or else I would have been able to put up more of a fight.

I got my first good look at his face as I struggled to free myself. He had slightly wavy hair that was almost black. It fell in front of his eyes, that at the moment, looked dark gray as he got a more secure grip on my wrists. A strong nose that was almost too prominent complemented his light olive skin, thin, but not too thin mouth, and angular jaw line.

He glared at me angrily. "Stop struggling," he spoke with a slight accent that I couldn't place. "I'm not here to hurt you."

I assessed the situation, then I went limp and smiled, because I remembered something that he had apparently forgotten. The man gave me a confused look, surprised that I had given up so easily, then Jason came flying out of nowhere and knocked the man off me. I got kneed in the gut as they tumbled away. Jason and the man began to fight for the upper hand, kicking up mud and leaves much in the same way that I had just experienced. Meanwhile, I stayed curled up on the ground trying to get a full breath in.

Finally I was able to stand, and I immediately turned my attention to the ongoing struggle. "Freeze!" I shouted.

Both men turned to regard me with identical expressions: angry, and a little confused, since they had apparently forgotten me. Jason had our watcher in an only partially effective headlock. Both of them were covered in mud and dry leaves. I glanced down and realized that I was too.

I quickly brushed myself off then looked the man in his dark gray eyes. "What do you want?"

He tried again to break Jason's hold on his neck, then gave up with a sigh and regarded me. "I was only supposed to follow you. I didn't expect you to chase me."

I crossed my arms and gave him an impatient expression. "And why were you following me?"

"Your dad asked me to," he answered angrily.

I should have known. He just couldn't leave well enough alone. I

turned my attention to Jason. “Let him go?”

Jason did as I asked. The man stood and brushed off his jeans and green military surplus jacket. Jason stood up next, obviously favoring his right leg. I felt a pang of worry at the thought that he might be injured, then mentally corrected myself. Jason wouldn’t think twice about a sprained ankle, he was a vampire after all.

Jason gave the man a vengeful look and asked, “What are you?”

The man ignored Jason and shuffled toward me, holding out his hand. “My name’s Chase.”

I ignored his offered hand. “He didn’t ask who you are. He asked what you are.”

The man, Chase, smiled pleasantly at me. “It’s none of his business what I am.”

I sighed. I was tired of this. “So my dad sent you to keep an eye on me because of the abductions?”

Chase nodded, but didn’t elaborate any further.

I was tired. My legs hurt. I had plenty of new bumps and bruises, and on top of it all, my clothes were completely ruined. I was so over this. I picked up my pepper spray that I had spotted during our odd conversation, marched up to Jason and grabbed his hand, then started off in the direction of the trail. Chase caught up to walk on my other side, at least as well as he could in between avoiding trees. I ignored him.

Life had finally gotten back to normal, as normal as it could get given my situation. Now in the course of a day, I had become a werewolf pack leader, and I suddenly had a dad again, a dad that was interfering way too much for my liking.

We reached the trail and I looked longingly in the direction of my home. I guess this was what I got for avoiding my new pack leader responsibilities. I decided to abandon my backpack and hope that it would still be there tomorrow. I just wanted to go home.

No one spoke the entire way to my house. We cut across my yard to my backdoor and I frowned, only then realizing that I had left my keys in my backpack. I crouched to get the key from underneath one of our many lawn gnomes. Now that Chase knew where it was I would have to hide it somewhere else. Or maybe I would just keep it on me. I looked at the man standing patiently on my left. He was around 6’, a little shorter than Jason. He had his hands in his pockets and was rocking back and forth on his heels like a little kid. Yeah, there was no way I was putting the key back in my yard.

Without saying a word, I unlocked the door, let Jason go in ahead of me, then shut it as soon as I had walked in, leaving Chase outside. He hadn’t seemed surprised.

The house was dark and quiet, letting me know that my mom still

wasn't home. I went to the little dark wood table that stands in my living room beside the entrance to the kitchen to check the answering machine. The little red light was flashing so I pushed the play button. As Lucy's voice filtered out, Jason brushed by me into the kitchen, letting his hand trail across my back as he walked.

Lucy's voice said that she and Max were meeting Lela and Nick at Irvine's pizza parlor tonight to fill out paperwork, and to call her back and let her know if I could come. I pushed the button to erase Lucy's message as Jason came back out of the kitchen.

I looked a question at his angry, furrowed brow.

Jason glanced in the direction of my kitchen window, then back to me. "He's sitting on your porch swing. He's *humming*."

I raised my eyebrows. "Humming?"

Jason nodded. "It sounds like Beethoven's 5th."

Jason walked toward my couch and I followed, thinking that Beethoven's 5th was an odd thing to hum. Jason and I both slumped down onto the cushy seat. I felt like I had run a marathon. I leaned my head back against the couch cushion and glanced up at the ceiling.

Jason spoke without looking at me. "He smells like you."

"So Chase is a demon?" I asked, not moving my head.

"At least half," he replied. "Maybe more. He has less of a human smell than you do."

I leaned forward and nodded, not wanting to discuss Chase any further. "I left my keys in the backpack"

Jason glanced at me, then leaned his head back against the cushion. "I will go get it." He leaned forward again then stood to leave.

I stopped him with a raised hand. "Lucy wants to meet at Irvine's tonight."

Jason nodded without looking at me. He seemed as exhausted as I was. "I will retrieve the backpack, then I'll go with you."

I nodded as Jason turned to go. I didn't want to go to Irvine's. I didn't want to fill out the paperwork that would make me a pack leader. I didn't want to go outside and deal with Chase.

If there's one thing I've learned, you can't always get what you want.

CHAPTER SEVEN

While Jason was gone, I changed out of my dirty clothes. It was lucky that I had chosen to wear dark colors. Maybe the mud stains wouldn't show after all. I dressed in dark wash jeans and a deep purple turtleneck, then went back downstairs to call Lucy.

The phone rang only once before a sharp voice answered, "Hello?"

"This is Xoe," I responded. "Is Lucy home?"

Silence on the other end of the line. After a minute Lucy picked up.

I sighed loudly to show her my exasperation. "What time?"

"In thirty minutes. You need a ride? Lela's picking me and Allison up."

"Jason's taking me, so I'll meet you there."

"Thanks again Xoe, I mean it."

"Yeah, yeah," I said sarcastically, then hung up the phone.

As soon as the phone clicked in the cradle it dawned on me that Allison had no reason to be there. It was likely that she'd try to include herself in the whole werewolf pack thing. She hates being left out. I guess I'd find out in thirty minutes.

Jason came clambering in through the backdoor a moment later. It still astounded me how fast he could be. Supposedly I should have been able to move that fast too, but the supernatural speed thing was beyond me. I listened as he rummaged through the backpack to find my keys. He came into the living room and tossed them to me.

"Ready to go?" he asked. "I still need to stop by my apartment and change."

I smiled despite my foul mood. Jason always made me smile, even when he was being sullen and pouty. What might have been annoying from someone else, I found endearing coming from Jason. Xoe, big bad half-demon, going soft. "We're supposed to meet them in thirty minutes."

He walked up and put his arm around my shoulders. "Let us go and face your little fiend . . . I mean friend."

I held up a finger. "Correction, let us go and ignore my little friend."

Jason smiled and walked me to the front door. We both went outside, locking the door behind us, then headed straight for Jason's

charcoal gray car. Chase watched us from his seat on my porch swing, then got up and jogged after us.

"Where are you going?" he called.

I continued ignoring him as I waited for Jason to walk to the driver's side and unlock the doors.

Chase caught up to stand beside me. "If you won't tell me, I'm going to have to call your dad."

I still couldn't place his accent, Greek maybe? "Seriously?" I asked.

He nodded, and grinned from ear to ear when he realized that he had me. Man he was annoying.

I sighed and gestured to the backseat. "Get in."

Jason gave me a startled expression over the roof of his car.

I shrugged. "I'd rather deal with him than my dad."

Jason still looked skeptical as he unlocked the doors and got in. I slid into the front passenger's seat and buckled my seatbelt, then turned with a squeak of leather to look back at Chase as Jason pulled out of my driveway. "So what, he just told you to stick with me and make sure I don't get abducted?"

Chase nodded. He was still in his muddy jeans and green jacket, which he had unzipped to reveal a black t-shirt.

"And how is it that you know my dad?" I asked when he didn't elaborate further.

He glanced at Jason, then back to me. "We can discuss that later."

I took my turn glancing at Jason, who was pretending to ignore our conversation, then turned my eyes back to Chase. "You know I'll just tell him later."

Chase crinkled his nose in irritation. "That is your choice, but the fact remains that it is none of his business." He was silent for a moment, and I started to turn around to face forward when he asked, "So where are we going?"

I stopped my turn long enough to smile sweetly at him and mimic, "That is simply none of your business."

I finished turning forward, still smiling. I watched out of the corner of my eye as a small smile crept across Jason's face to match my own.

A few minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot of Jason's apartment complex and parked in one of the many vacant spaces. It was one of the nicer apartment complexes in Shelby (which isn't saying much, since it's one of only three). He could afford it with the money he had made tracking down and aiding in the "disposal" of Dan, but I knew he'd have to take another job sometime soon. The money couldn't last forever, especially now that I'd found out he only got half of what I did. I hunkered down and did my best not to think about it.

Jason turned off the ignition and glanced at me, obviously not

wanting to leave me alone in the car with Chase. I gave him a subtle nod, letting him know that I could handle things, and he reluctantly exited the car and went up the concrete stairs to his apartment.

Without the car heater I began to shiver despite my turtleneck. Normally Jason would have left the car running for me, but I couldn't blame him for being preoccupied. I looked out at the dreary cold streets to a couple walking in heavy winter coats. Okay, so maybe I could blame him just a little.

Chase stuck his head up beside my shoulder. "You want my jacket? It's a little dirty . . . "

I shook my head and answered quickly, "I'm fine." Why, oh why didn't I bring a jacket?

"You sure?" Chase pressed.

I nodded, not wanting to take his jacket on sheer principle.

"Suit yourself," he replied as he leaned back into his seat and began humming. This time it sounded like Depeche Mode's *Enjoy the Silence*.

Jason finally came trotting back down the stairs to rescue me, dressed in jeans and a navy sweater. He slid back into the driver's seat and quickly started the car to blast the heat. He looked at me with an embarrassed smile.

"Sorry," he apologized.

"No worries," I grumbled as we pulled out to head to Irvine's.

Irvine's is one of the few mediocre pizza parlors in town. There are one or two quality ones, but we always went to Irvine's, don't ask me why. After we parked, we walked straight into the brightly lit pizza parlor to get out of the cold.

Irvine's is decorated to look like a retro diner complete with jukebox and red vinyl booths and stools. Lucy and the others were nowhere to be seen, so we slid into one of the large corner booths to wait. Jason slid in to sit on one side of me as Chase went around to the other end of the booth to slide in on my other side. I sat awkwardly with my hands in my lap and longed for the night to be over.

We ordered two extra-large pizzas and a few pitchers of soda as we waited. Finally Lela came striding through the door looking long and lean in all black with a stack of papers hugged to her chest. Lucy, Max, and Allison strode in shortly after her, all smartly dressed in heavy winter coats. Lela spotted us instantly and came clacking up in her high-heeled black boots. She slid in beside Chase, never questioning his presence. Lucy and Max slid in after her.

Allison paused in front of the table and gave Chase a less than friendly look. "Who are you?"

Chase gave her a stoic expression and stared back.

“This is Chase,” I answered tiredly.

Allison slid in next to Jason, flipping her long honey-blonde hair irritably, and grumbling something about a “rude, pretentious, slimeball,” or something of that nature.

I was surprised at Allison’s attitude. She usually took any opportunity she could to meet a new cute boy. I had a feeling it had something to do with her feeling left out lately. She was the only human left in the group, and now there was another presumably non-human guy that could potentially take up more of her friend time. And who said I wasn’t perceptive?

“Where’s Nick?” I asked.

“Who cares?” Allison grumbled.

“He said he’d meet us here,” Lela answered over her.

The waitress emerged from the kitchen with a pizza gripped in each of her hands. She set them on our table and promised to be right back with plates. Tension eased inside of me as the smell of cheese and mushrooms wafted up from the pizzas.

Lela waited long enough for the waitress to bring our plates, then got right down to business. She handed Lucy and Max their forms and I let out a sigh of relief when I saw that they were only a few pages thick. Then she handed me my forms. I gaped at the stack of papers in my hands. It was a friggin’ book!

I turned to Lela with my jaw agape. “Seriously?” I asked incredulously.

She had the courtesy to look abashed. “Sorry Xoe, the only information the coalition really cares about is that of the pack leader.”

I sighed and set the packet down on the table, then took the offered pen from Lela. I grabbed my first slice of pizza with my left hand and began filling out my basic information with my right. Chase seemed to be taking things in stride, so I assumed my dad had filled him in on everything. He sat perfectly at ease as he devoured his first slice of pizza and ignored everyone. Jason was sitting closer to me than was necessary, and I was beginning to feel more than a little overwhelmed.

Nick showed up a few minutes after the pizza, and had to pull up a chair to sit at the edge of the table that wasn’t surrounded by the booth. Lela smiled and handed him a stack of papers. I began to go back to my paperwork, but something made me take a second look at Lela’s smile. Nick had looked down to his paperwork, but Lela continued to smile all googly-eyed at him. Oh man, she totally liked him. It made me trust him even less. Not because she liked him, but perhaps her judgment of him was clouded, and her judgment was all we had to go on in trusting him. I looked back down to my paperwork, feeling even more uneasy, if that was even possible.

By the time I had finished my second slice, Lucy, Max, and Nick had finished their forms and handed them back to Lela. I was still working on mine, and the questions were becoming more and more strange the further I got. Was it really necessary for them to know my blood type? Plus, I was entirely at a loss as to what I should put under the section labeled *preferred hunting grounds*.

Allison cleared her throat and gave me a meaningful look when I glanced at her. She and Lucy both excused themselves to go to the bathroom. Catching on, I got up and followed them. So it was terribly obvious that we wanted to talk amongst ourselves, could you really blame us? The three of us walked into the bathroom and shut the door firmly behind us.

After checking that all of the stalls were empty, Allison whirled on me and asked, "Who is that other guy and why is he here?"

I turned to Lucy. "I assume you filled her in on the stuff with my dad?"

Lucy nodded and I turned back to Allison. "Chase is my dad's idea of a bodyguard."

"Because of the abductions?" Lucy asked.

I nodded. "Yep, Jason and I caught him watching us in the woods."

Allison frowned. "Why is he still with you?"

Lucy answered for me, already seeing my logic. "It's him or your dad?"

I nodded again as I turned to push open the door. "Yep, the lesser of two evils."

Allison pursed her lips. "I don't like it."

I stopped in mid-motion and smiled wanly. "Neither do I, but Chase is the least of our worries right now."

Allison nodded her head in agreement. "I don't think the pack thing is a good idea either."

That wasn't what I was expecting. I turned to fully face her again and cocked my head, waiting for her to explain her logic.

"It's just . . . " she began, then took a moment to consider her words. I noticed the chagrined expression on Lucy's face and deduced that they had already discussed this. "It seems like a big commitment," Allison went on. "You have to fill out all of these forms, and promise to meet with all of these people you don't know, and then there's Nick. How can we even begin to trust *him*? He came out of nowhere."

I shrugged. "What else can we do?"

"That's just it," Allison continued. "It seems like there's never any choice on anything. You have no choice but to let that Chase guy hang around, you have no choice but to form a pack. There should be choices."

I was getting a headache. I met Lucy's tired expression, identical to my own when I answered, "I agree, but there aren't."

Allison stomped her foot to bring attention back to herself. "How can you two be so calm about everything!"

Finally getting angry, I raised my voice, "Stop it Al! I can't help what I am, or who my dad is, and Lucy couldn't help being scratched by Dan. We're just trying to make the best of our situations."

"I know that!" Allison yelled back, her face becoming increasingly flushed. "But you should be upset about it!"

I began to shout back, but forced myself to stop. Getting angry in a public place was *so* not a good idea. I knew I should be understanding of Allison being upset, but there was only so much I could take. When it came down to it, Allison was upset because Lucy and I had problems, but *we* were the ones that actually had to deal with the problems. If dealing with them meant accepting things, then so be it.

Lucy reached for Allison to calm her down just as Lela peeked her head into the bathroom. "Everything all right?" she asked.

"Peachy," Allison snapped, before stomping out of the bathroom past Lela. I gave Lucy a sad smile and we both followed her out.

Once we were back at the table, no one seemed to be very hungry anymore. No one argued when I offered to take home the leftovers, so I packed them up, then we all pitched in on the check and left. On the drive home I tossed my monstrous packet of forms on the floor of Jason's car, kept my takeout box on my lap, and cranked up the radio, not wanting anymore conversation.

I was relieved to see my mom's car in the driveway as we reached my house. I climbed out of the car and headed straight for my front door. I waited on the porch with the door open for Jason to go inside, but he made it obvious that he wanted me to go in first.

Chase waited expectantly, as if he would be coming inside as well. I regarded him. "You're not coming in. Go ahead and call my dad. He can keep you company out here." With that I strode inside and allowed Jason the pleasure of shutting the door in Chase's face.

I quickly forgot my satisfaction as I paused in the living room and took a good look around, completely stunned. The couch, loveseat, and surrounding floor were cluttered with a multitude of shopping bags. Apparently my mom had engaged in a bit of retail therapy. I picked my way through the clutter, then jogged upstairs to her room and went in without knocking. She was passed out on her bed, shoes and trench coat still on.

I let out a sigh of relief, glad that she was home and . . . coping. I tugged off her plain brown shoes and put the royal purple throw from the foot of her bed over her. I closed the door gently as I left her room, even though I doubted anything short of a foghorn could wake

her.

I went back downstairs to find Jason standing in the kitchen. His attention was on the window, or more precisely what he could see of Chase through the window. He had resumed his post on my porch swing, gently rocking it back and forth with his feet on the ground. Jason was so intent on trying to make Chase disappear by sheer force of will that I don't think he even heard me approach.

I stepped right in front of him with my arms crossed and cleared my throat loudly.

He looked down at me, brow still furrowed. "I don't like him," he said, referring to Chase.

I shrugged. "Can't say I really blame you."

Jason and I both turned our attention back to the window. As the swing came forward and brought him into full view, Chase gave us a sarcastic salute, making Jason's face turn red with anger. It wasn't like him to lose his temper so easily (that was usually my job), and I wondered if there was something else that had him on edge.

I grabbed his hand and drew him away from the window, then wrapped my arms around his waist in a loose hug. I stared at him until he met my eyes. "Tell me what's wrong," I ordered.

Jason gave me a glimpse of his usual crooked smile. "You are far too perceptive," he conceded.

I smiled back. "Tell me."

"I received a job offer," he said softly.

I cocked my head in question. "So . . . ?"

He licked his lips nervously. "So, I would need to leave immediately."

I broke eye contact and looked down at the floor. "Oh."

"I wouldn't even consider it," he said quickly, then went on more slowly, "but jobs can be few and far between. I can turn down this one, but there is no saying when the next offer will come along."

"You should take it," I said quickly, knowing that if I took any time to think about it, I'd ask him not to go.

"I know it's bad timing . . . " he began.

"Will you be gone long?" I interrupted, a little more snappishly than I had intended.

"Only a few days," he answered, clearly relieved that I wasn't going to make an extended issue out of him going. "I should be home before Christmas, definitely by your birthday."

My birthday was on the 31st, so that meant he could be gone around 10 days. I nodded despite my feelings. "You leave in the morning?"

He drew me closer, wrapping his arms tightly around me. "Yes," he answered, his lips moving right beside my ear. "I will have to go home

to prepare tonight, but I'll come by before I leave."

I nodded again and closed my eyes against his shoulder, not sure what else to say. I breathed in the woodsy, vanilla tinted smell of him, not relishing the thought of being away from that scent for even a day.

I felt him glance toward the window again. "If he gives you any trouble, I would like for you to call me immediately."

"I can handle it," I said softly.

"I know," he breathed into my hair, "but call me anyway."

And just like that, he was gone, shutting the front door silently behind him. I stayed standing in my kitchen for several minutes, my arms wrapped tightly around me. I eventually moved into the living room and tossed my mom's bags onto the floor so I could curl up on the loveseat. I sank into the cushions feeling sorry for myself. I waited, hoping that Jason would come back and reconsider, or that he'd pop in and say, "Gotcha! Just kidding."

When nothing happened, I went upstairs to my room. It was close to midnight. I had no idea where the time had gone. I must have sat downstairs for several hours. I walked into my cozy purple-themed bathroom to get ready for bed. I brushed my teeth and scrubbed my face, splashing myself several times with cold water to try and snap myself out of my stupor. I dried myself off with a fluffy purple towel, then forced my eyes up to the mirror.

I looked miserable. I was falling apart because my boyfriend was leaving town during the time I needed him most. It wasn't his fault, but I still felt slightly resentful. Man, I was *pitiful*.

I slapped my hand against the sink with a dull thud, making little sparks of pain run up my wrist. I would *not* fall apart because of a boy. I'd always been able to take care of myself no matter what life threw at me, and damn it, I could handle my situation on my own. I smiled, proud that I had so quickly pulled myself together.

I am demon, hear me roar.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There wasn't any fire this time. I was once again on a cold, stone floor, but this time I was lying down with my cheek pressed against the rock. I tried to get up to explore my surroundings, but I couldn't move. I could hear footsteps. Someone came to stand in my field of vision, but all I could see was their shoed feet. The feet kept shifting in shape and color so that I couldn't tell what they looked like. One moment they were a pair of women's high heels, the next, a pair of combat boots. Then the person knelt down beside me, and I knew with sudden certainty that I was going to die.

WHEN I FINALLY WOKE UP THE next morning around 9:00, I could vaguely remember Jason coming in through my window in the ungodly early morning hours to say goodbye before he left. My dream had really thrown me. My dreams of fire had always been unnerving, but this one caused me to wake with a solid cold knot of fear in my stomach. I rolled out from underneath my dark green bedspread, hating everything while trying to push my fear aside. I glanced out my large bedroom window to see that the miserable weather matched my mood. Dark grays and blues swirled ominously, promising snow. It was going to be a white Christmas . . . yippee.

I took a shower and got dressed in a deep red cable-knit sweater, and faded, holey jeans shoved into dark brown, low-heeled slouchy boots (courtesy of Allison's annual wardrobe cleansing). Not bothering to do anything with my hair, I clunked downstairs in search of coffee.

I caught sight of my mom sitting at the dining room table dressed in a royal blue sweater dress and black boots. She sipped coffee while carrying on a jovial conversation. My day darkened exponentially when I came around the corner and saw that she was talking to Chase, who looked quite comfortable in his forest green sweater and jeans. He was drinking coffee out of my usual coffee mug. It was oversized and had an illustration of a dejected looking Edgar Allan Poe on one side. It was my tried and true favorite.

I walked into the kitchen to find a completely empty coffee pot. I grumbled to myself as I ground some beans and got a fresh pot going. I grabbed a store-bought blueberry muffin and stomped back into the

dining room, taking a seat on the far side of the table, away from my mom and Chase. They interrupted their conversation to turn their attention to me.

I regarded my mom, ignoring Chase's presence. "No work today?"

"No," she answered, a big, fake smile plastered across her face. "I'm feeling a bit tired," she went on, her smile crumbling around the edges.

I nodded, understanding that she still wasn't ready to discuss things further. She gave me a genuine, if small, smile in return.

"So," my mom began awkwardly, "I found your friend on the porch and invited him in to wait for you." She smiled warmly at Chase, but I could sense her wariness underneath. "I don't know how he didn't freeze to death out there."

My smile for Chase was more of a snarl. "He's not my friend," I corrected, making eye contact with Chase as I said it.

"Oh," my mom hesitated. "Well, um, I have a lot of gift wrapping to do, so I'll leave you two alone."

She stood and hustled out of the dining room. I caught her glancing back at us with motherly concern before she turned to hurry up the stairs. I had a feeling the days of my mom prying were at an end. She could never be sure what information she might pry her way into.

I turned my attention to Chase. "You got a car?"

He smiled pleasantly at me despite my earlier rudeness. "I can get one," he answered simply.

I nodded and stood to get myself a cup of coffee. Chase stood as well and immediately let himself out the front door, presumably to "get" a car. I hadn't felt the need to let him in on the fact that I just wanted him to take me to the mall to finish my Christmas shopping. He might not have deemed it important enough.

I sat back down at the table with hot coffee and my muffin and couldn't help my mischievous grin. Messing with Chase had made me feel infinitely better. I would have to continue doing so. My thoughts went to Jason, and I immediately redirected them. What else did I need to buy for Christmas . . . oh who was I kidding? I stared down into my coffee cup and wallowed.

By the time Chase returned, I had finished my coffee and muffin and was leafing through a catalog while I waited. I grabbed my keys and wallet to throw into a plain cloth purse I had recently bought and went outside to meet him. The cloudy sky had made me expect miserable weather, but the air felt cool and calm. I still expected snow, but maybe it would be the pleasant, soft-falling snow that's so popular in Hallmark commercials, rather than the harsh, blizzardy snow that was more often the reality.

Chase was leaning against an ancient gray, rust-speckled pickup truck. I had serious doubts that it would even make it to the mall. He stepped away from the truck and swung his arms out to pose like a model on a game show.

"Your chariot awaits," he said dramatically.

I raised my eyebrows. "Lovely," I replied sarcastically.

Chase smiled and went around to get in the driver's side. I yanked the passenger door open and climbed into the ancient seat. Chase shut his door and started the ignition. I squirmed as I tried to find a position where the seat springs wouldn't poke into me through the seat's flattened padding. I finally settled in with a disgruntled expression.

Chase, misreading my expression of distaste asked, "Did you want to drive or something?"

I paused a moment in confusion, then seeing an opportunity, quickly hoisted my nose into the air, as if offended that he had assumed the role of driver without asking me. "Yes, yes I do."

He didn't even argue. He just got out and went around to the passenger's side while I slid across the small middle seat into the driver's seat. I couldn't help but be pleased. My driving terrifies my mom, so since I don't have a car of my own, I didn't get to drive often. I was practically bouncing up and down with excitement by the time Chase finished buckling himself into the passenger's seat.

Taking in my maniacal glee, he looked at me nervously. "Something tells me I'm going to regret this."

I took the time to flash him a quick grin, then slammed my foot on the gas.

The truck peeled out of my driveway, kicking gravel up in its wake. The old clunker had a lot more power than my mom's little car. I eased off the gas just a little bit as we wove through my neighborhood toward the highway.

I spared a quick glance at Chase. "Mind if we take the long way?"

"Sure," he said weakly.

I drove a short way on the small highway that leads through the middle of town, then turned onto a street that would take me to the back roads. I was mainly going this way to avoid the graveyard, but I'd let Chase believe that I just wanted a chance to drive the truck on the long, curvy back roads. Heck, he'd be partially right to believe so.

As soon as we reached the start of the narrow road that curves out into the woods on the outskirts of Shelby, I let my foot fall down on the gas. Chase was beginning to look a bit more relaxed, so I rolled down my window and hit the gas a little bit more. The wind blowing in through the window pummeled me, making my hair swirl around my head. Since I hadn't done anything to my hair that morning

anyways, I wasn't about to worry about it.

Chase cranked up the ancient radio, then started flipping through the few stations that we get in Shelby. He settled on a station that was playing *Living on a Thin Line* by the Kinks, then leaned back against his seat.

As we made our way down the deserted road, partially shaded by the surrounding trees, I eased my foot off the gas a bit. For the first time in days, a feeling of relaxed contentment came over me. Driving that old truck, I felt in control. Chase may not have been my first choice for company, but the wind in my hair felt good, and we were in little danger of being attacked or confronted by anyone or anything. My thoughts wandered to Jason, and the fact that I didn't even know where he was going or what his "job" was. I quickly stifled the irritation that bubbled in me, not wanting to ruin the peacefulness of the moment.

Thinking it was as good a time as any, I turned down the radio and rolled my window up partially so I could talk to Chase. I waited in the relative silence for him to turn his attention from the window to me. When he didn't I cleared my throat.

He turned to me, startled out of his thoughts.

Keeping my attention on the road, I asked, "Now that we're alone, are you ready to explain to me just how you know my dad, and why he chose you to *protect* me?"

He was silent for a moment, then answered softly, "I owe your dad a favor, really, I owe him my life."

I raised my eyebrows at that, and spared Chase a quick glance to assure myself that he wasn't messing with me. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"And . . . ?"

He cleared his throat. "And . . . that's it."

I let that line of conversation drop, not that I was done with it, but I could stand to postpone it until he was feeling slightly more sharing. "So . . . " I began, "Jason said that you smell like me, like a demon."

"Yes," he replied, not elaborating any further.

I pinched my lips in frustration. "What gives? You said you would explain things to me once we were alone."

He sighed loudly. "Yes, I'm a demon too. My mom was a full demon, and my dad was a half demon."

"So you're more demon-y than I am?" I interrupted.

He smiled. "In an inconsequential kind of way. Demons have different bloodlines. The more powerful the bloodline, the more powerful the demon. The more powerful the demon, the more traits they will pass on to their offspring. Your dad comes from a very powerful bloodline. My parents were both from mixed bloodlines."

“So . . .” I prompted.

“So,” he went on, “though I have more demon blood than you, you’re slightly more ‘demon-y’ than me.”

“How demon-y are you?” I pressed. “What can you do?”

He resigned himself to our line of conversation and began to explain, “I’m told that my dad was a necro-demon, he could speak to the dead and create zombies, and my mom was a Naga.”

I pursed my lips in stunned thought for a minute. And here I was thinking that nothing could shock me anymore. “Okay, first, necro-demon? And second, what the heck is a Naga? And why do you say ‘I’m told’?”

He smiled bitterly. “First, yes, necro-demon. Second, a Naga in the most simple terms is a snake person. Third, I say ‘I’m told’ because my dad abandoned me when I was young. I was raised by my mother.” He said everything as if it was very matter-of-fact, with no emotion whatsoever.

I decided that I probably didn’t know him well enough to question him further about being abandoned. It could be a sore subject. I should know. “So what can you do?”

He seemed relieved that I had taken my questioning in this direction. “Well,” he began, “working with the dead is mostly beyond me. I can occasionally see glimpses of ghosts and spirits, but that’s about it. I have the regular demon traits: extra strength, sharpened senses, better healing. I’m probably stronger in those areas than you, just because of the amount of demon blood I have. It’s the actual powers I’m more lacking in. Also, from my mom’s side, I’m poisonous.”

Oh ick. “In what way?” I asked.

He turned to me and grinned, showing teeth. Two tiny fangs appeared at his gum line and slowly extended over his canines. I almost swerved off the road watching them.

He laughed then looked back out the windshield. “In *that* way,” he answered.

“Oh,” I replied, feeling a major case of heebie-jeebies. Enough of that subject. “And why do you owe my dad your life?”

He cringed, then glanced at me nervously. “Another time?” he asked.

“Sure,” I conceded, “another time.”

He slumped down in his seat, as if giving me all this information had cost him a great deal. Who knew? Maybe it had.

By the time we finally pulled up to the mall, I had gone into full relaxation mode. I know it was a bit odd, that I was only able to finally relax in the presence of a stranger, one who I should have known better than to be relaxed around, but there it was regardless. It

was nice to be away from responsibilities and expectations.

I manually rolled up the window, and Chase and I both stepped out of the rickety truck. I had to slam my door twice to get it to latch, then we both headed toward the mall. Chase walked casually by my side, holding the door open for me with a slightly mocking smile. I walked through nonchalantly, not bothering to catch the door on the interior to hold it open for him. I was instantly bombarded by the chaos of a shopping center a week before Christmas. I sent a brief, angry thought to my dad, blaming him for the fact that I had to come to the mall twice in one week.

The only person I had left to buy for was Jason, and I was still at a loss as to what to get him. I figured Barnes & Noble was as good a place to start as any, and made a beeline for the store with Chase hot on my heels. Once in the store, I began browsing the shelves with the idea that I could simply buy him a bunch of books, and hopefully equal, but not outdo whatever he got for me.

Chase leaned in over my shoulder, his face uncomfortably close to mine. His shampoo smelled like oranges. “Who ya shopping for?” he asked in a sing-song manner.

I sidestepped to put some space between us. “None of your business,” I grumbled.

Chase made a hmmf sound in his throat, then held up a finger, as if experiencing an epiphany. “Aaah, shopping for the vampire, are we?”

I glared at him. “Yes, if you must know. My dad interrupted my shopping the other day. Jason’s was the only gift I didn’t get.”

Chase simply nodded and strolled away to a different shelf of books, hands clasped behind his back casually. My relaxed ease officially crushed, I turned my attention back to my task. I was beginning to think that the bookstore was a lost cause, because I couldn’t be sure what Jason had or hadn’t read. Then my eyes were drawn to a collection on an end-cap. I walked closer to investigate, realizing that the collection was a boxed set of fifteen classics. Bingo. I swiped up the box, not bothering to check the price, and headed to the register.

After I paid, I started looking around for Chase, who was nowhere to be seen. I deduced that he wasn’t anywhere in the store, so I walked out into the crowded concourse to look for him. The place was a madhouse, and I resigned myself to the possibility that it could be awhile before I found him, and I had stupidly handed him the truck keys. Not that I would strand him at the mall. No . . . neeever.

Just as I was about to park my butt on a bench to wait, Chase came striding toward me with a coffee cup in each hand. As he approached he extended one out to me. “Peace offering?” he said with a smile.

I switched my shopping bag to my left hand and took the offered coffee with a glare. “You make it very hard to dislike you.”

Chase’s smile grew as he rocked back and forth on his heels. “Then I suggest you stop trying.”

I smirked at him, then turned to walk back toward the closest exit.

Chase caught up to walk shoulder to shoulder with me. “You’re done already?”

I nodded. The exit was in sight. Eye on the prize, eye on the prize. I’d be away from the bustling crowd soon.

“Did you get anything for your dad?”

I stopped and spun on Chase. “Are you kidding?”

Chase raised his dark eyebrows at my reaction. “Why would I be kidding? He *has* afforded you your very own bodyguard,” he said, putting his arms out and looking himself up and down.

I let out a harsh breath. “And that’s supposed to make up for not being around my entire life?”

“No,” Chase said apathetically, “but it’s a start.”

I just stared at him, at a loss for words.

He made a calming gesture with his free hand. “Sorry, sorry. I concede to your point. Now drink your coffee.”

I took a sip, more to cover up how flustered I was than anything. Creamy deliciousness poured down my throat. Delighted, I asked, “What on earth is this wonderful concoction?”

“Breve,” Chase responded, laughing at me. “It’s like a latte, but they use half-and-half instead of milk.”

I smiled. “You are fully forgiven. Let’s go.”

We went.

CHAPTER NINE

It was already 3:00 pm when we got back to my house. My mom's car was missing from the driveway again. I went inside, grudgingly inviting Chase in with me, and learned from my mom's note that she was indulging in more retail therapy. She had probably been at the mall when we were, but it was so crowded, I wasn't surprised we hadn't run into her.

I walked to the machine and pushed the button below the flashing red light. The first message was from one of my mom's coworkers and I skipped over it after a few seconds. Lucy's voice played out of the machine next. "Xoe, it's Lucy. We can't find Lela. She was supposed to meet me and Max hours ago. Call me back."

Lucy's message clicked off and I jumped when my dad's voice began to play. "Alexondra, stay near Chase. We need to talk." Click. Ominous, very ominous.

I turned toward Chase, who had been listening over my shoulder. It was lucky that I reached those messages before my mom. I really needed a cell phone.

"Any idea what he wants?" I asked.

Chase shrugged. "Not a clue. Lela was one of the werewolves we met at the pizza parlor, right?"

I nodded as a sick feeling sunk into my gut. Something was very wrong. My skin started to prickle with an electric sensation. A moment later, there was a knock on the door.

"It's your dad." Chase stated.

I went to answer the door, figuring the prickle had been me sensing my dad's peculiar form of teleportation. Maybe I could learn that one too. Now *that* would be nice.

As soon as I opened the door, my dad came striding in, looking expensive in black slacks and a dark blue, cashmere sweater. "A witch was abducted in Bear Creek," he stated, anger tinting his words. Bear Creek was another small town within an hour of Shelby.

"They're getting closer," Chase observed.

"Well duh," I added. Then turning toward my dad I asked, "I take it we should be worried?"

He nodded, making his blond hair fall forward from behind his

ears. “I will protect you.”

“I don’t want your protection,” I replied defensively.

“But you need it anyhow.”

I barely heard my dad’s last statement. A horrible idea had dawned on me. “Lela’s missing.”

My dad looked at me, obvious surprise showing on his face. “One of your wolves?”

I nodded.

My dad nodded somberly. “They’re here then.”

My palms began to sweat from my nerves. I suddenly didn’t feel safe at all. “What do we do?”

Chase put a hand on my shoulder. “No one’s going to take you.”

I shrugged his hand off and turned to face him. “That’s not what I was asking!” I shouted. “How do we find Lela?”

“Calm down Alexondra,” my dad said flatly. “You will stay here with Chase. I will find your wolf.”

Before I could argue, my dad strode straight out the front door, closing it behind him. I ran to the door and flung it open, but all that was left was a wisp of smoke and a scorch mark on the gravel. Unable to argue with my dad, I slammed the door shut and stomped to the phone. I picked it up and quickly dialed Lucy’s number.

She picked up on the first ring. “Xoe?” Lucy’s voice questioned.

“We think Lela was taken,” I said quickly. “You and Max should come to my house.”

“Safety in numbers?” Lucy asked.

“Something like that,” I muttered.

“I’ll call Max. See you soon.” She hung up.

Feeling numb, I gently set the phone back in the cradle. Chase was watching me from across the room, still standing where I left him. “We can’t go looking for her,” he said, referring to Lela.

I shook my head in frustration. “Who said I was going to look for her?”

Chase raised a questioning eyebrow at me, but said nothing.

“Okay, okay.” I raised my hands in submission. “So the thought had crossed my mind, but I have no clue where to start looking.”

Chase sighed loudly. “Where was she seen last?”

I smiled. “So you’ll help?”

He grimaced, then nodded slowly. “Just don’t make me regret it.”

My smile grew. “We have to wait for Lucy and Max. They’ll know where she was.”

Chase nodded. “We’ll all go there together. I doubt we’ll find any clues, but in the very least Max and Lucy might find a scent.”

I nodded, feeling relieved to at least have a semblance of a plan. “Sounds good.” Then after a horribly loud growl from my stomach, I

added, “You hungry?”

Chase finally smiled, if a little weakly. “Starved.”

I went into the kitchen to rummage. Chase came into the kitchen as I was pawing through the few items in our fridge. I took out a cardboard carton of Chinese food and opened it to take a whiff. Satisfied, I handed the carton to Chase and reached in for the others. We zapped them all in the microwave. Then with forks in hand, went to the dining room table.

We sat, and I grabbed the box of Mongolian beef right before Chase could snatch it for himself. He frowned, then went for the sweet-and-sour chicken. I took my first bite of food and smiled smugly at him.

“So,” I began around a mouthful of broccoli, “do we have any idea what type of, um, creatures are behind the abductions?”

Chase shook his head, not looking up from his food. “Obviously someone, or something pretty strong, seeing as they were able to abduct witches and werewolves.”

“And merpeople,” I added.

“Yeah, but merpeople aren’t any stronger that regular humans. They just swim faster.”

I nodded. “Learn something new every day.”

There was a knock at the door. Chase set down his box of chicken to get up and answer it. I heard the door open, then Lucy’s voice as she and Max came in.

Lucy entered the dining room first, looking disheveled in blue plaid flannel and jeans, with her hair a staticy mess around her delicate face. She took the chair across from me that Chase had used and slumped down in the seat as if exhausted. She eyed the boxes of Chinese food skeptically, then at my arched eyebrow, started filling me in on the details. “We were all supposed to meet at Max’s house,” she began. “We knew Lela had a job interview this morning, so we didn’t worry at first when she was late. But then an hour went by, and we still hadn’t heard from her. I called her cell phone and a stranger answered. He said he had just found her phone lying in the middle of the sidewalk.”

Chase pulled out the chair beside Lucy, while Max took the seat to my left. Max was dressed in a bright yellow sweater and his usual khaki cargo pants.

Chase turned to Lucy. “Did he say where he was when he found it?”

Lucy nodded. “The phone was outside of Blue Moon coffee shop. He told us he’d leave it inside with the cashier. Blue Moon is right across the street from the bank where Lela was supposed to interview.”

I pushed away my unfinished Mongolian beef. “Well I guess that’s where we’ll start.”

“What about that other guy?” Chase asked. “The one who was late for pizza.”

“Nick?” Lucy responded. “We haven’t seen him since yesterday. We don’t even know how to get a hold of him.”

I sighed. “Great, just great.”

We all stood to leave, abandoning the leftover Chinese food on the table. I grabbed my cloth purse and shiny dark brown leather jacket as we walked out the door. Chase locked and shut the door behind us, then fished in his pocket for the truck keys, which he then tossed to me. I caught them one-handed, then noticed the box of Chinese food in his hand. It was my discarded Mongolian beef.

Noticing my glance, he produced a fork from his back pocket. He put a bite of beef and broccoli in his mouth and chewed slowly with a pleased smile on his face. I laughed despite our dire situation. I just couldn’t help it.

We all piled into the ancient truck, Lucy squished into the middle of the front seat between Chase and me, while Max squeezed into one of those pointless little fold-down seats that some pick-up trucks have behind the front seat.

“Whose truck is this?” Lucy asked as we pulled out of the driveway on onto the street.

“Chase’s,” I answered.

Chase cleared his throat. “Technically, it’s Xoe’s dad’s truck. He bought it.”

I turned toward him, almost swerving off the road. “So when you left, you had my dad buy you a truck?”

Chase had the courtesy to look abashed. “No. I bought it, but I bought it with the expense account your dad allowed me while I’m watching you.”

I didn’t argue. It seriously chaffed to have to take so much help from my dad, but I would not pout. When life hands you demons . . . well, you get the idea.

Chase was still waiting for my reaction. I put a pleasant smile on my face. “Well, now that I know that, I know who’ll be paying for stuff from now on.”

Chase smiled back mischievously and produced a wallet from his pocket, then picked out a blue credit card to hold up. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

As I exited onto the highway, I glanced at Max in the rearview mirror. A look of astonishment was plastered on his face. Lucy looked like she had eaten something sour. I realized that a lot had changed between Chase and I in the course of one day. It was nice to have a

companion that didn't ask anything of me, except that he had to stay by my side. My thoughts fluttered to Jason, wondering where he was and what he was doing. I was going to have to make a phone call and get some answers.

We were nearing the exit that would take us to what I thought of as the pedestrian area of Shelby. The few roads that the area consisted of were populated with coffee shops, bookstores, bars, restaurants, and some random curio shops. There was one large parking lot, and the few other spots were all parallel parking, so most people parked in the lot and walked to their destination.

I took the exit, then only had to drive another minute or so to reach the lot. I took the first available spot next to several motorcycles. We all climbed out of the truck and began to walk the three street blocks to Blue Moon Cafe. Though it was only around 5:00 pm, it was also December in Oregon, so the sun was slowly making its descent behind the mountains. There weren't many people out. Most of the coffee shop goers had gone home, and the bar and restaurant goers were yet to surface.

First we visited the bank where Lela was supposed to interview, but it had just closed, so we went across the street to the coffee shop, which was open until 9:00. Blue Moon is one of the fancier coffee shops in Shelby, but they scoff at any request for a $1.50 regular coffee, so I almost never go there.

As we entered the glass double-doors, I was instantly soothed by the warm ambiance and the scent of vanilla and coffee. The upper walls and ceiling were done in a midnight blue, with tiny pinpricks of fiber-optic light scattered everywhere, and the lower walls were an opalescent white. Blue Moon may be overpriced, but you sure have to hand it to them on the décor.

I walked up to the dark blue countertop to order a cup of coffee and ask some questions. Lucy and Max sat at a table by the window, while Chase came to stand beside me at the counter. A tall young woman with tightly curled red hair, fair, freckled skin, and pale green eyes approached the register. She wore a black polo and a black apron with moons and stars on it that was standard issue for the Blue Moon staff. Her nametag said "Megan". I didn't recognize her as anyone I'd seen working there before, though like I said, I didn't go there often.

She smiled a little too pleasantly at me, revealing perfectly straight white teeth. "What can I get for you?" she asked in an overly perky voice.

I couldn't remember the name of what Chase had gotten us at the mall, so I turned to him to order. Chase looked down at me with an awkward wideness to his eyes, like he was trying to tell me something. He turned back to the woman and gave her a charming

smile. “Four tall breves please.”

“Will that be all?” the woman asked in a sing-song voice.

“Yes it will,” I answered. “By the way, are you new here? I haven’t seen you around.”

The woman’s smile faltered around the edges. “Yes, yes I am.”

I was about to ask about Lela’s cell phone, but Chase kicked my foot in warning. I gave him a dirty look, but didn’t argue as he handed the woman his card to pay for our coffees. I left him at the counter to sign the receipt and joined Max and Lucy at the table.

Chase waited at the counter while the woman made our coffees, then made two short trips to carry the to-go cups to our table before he sat beside me. After he placed the second set of coffees on the table, he leaned over to me and put his lips by my ear in a strangely intimate gesture. I started to pull away, but then realized that he was trying to tell me something.

“She’s not human,” he breathed.

I pulled away and giggled as if he had said something horribly amusing. If she was a werewolf, she’d overhear us if we spoke normally. I leaned toward his ear flirtatiously and whispered, “What is she?”

He put his arm around me and pulled my ear close to him again. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “Max or Lucy might be able to tell if they’ve encountered the scent before.”

Max and Lucy had been pretending to ignore us, but with their nearness and werewolf hearing, they had probably heard every word, even with the whispering. Max confirmed my suspicions when he stood and walked up to the cashier. He came back after a few seconds with a little shaker full of cinnamon. Max gave the barest shrug as he sat back down. He hadn’t recognized the scent, which meant she wasn’t werewolf, vampire, or demon.

Lucy caught my eyes, then glanced back at the counter. The woman had been watching us throughout our exchange. She quickly turned around to busy herself at the espresso machine as soon as I looked at her. I glanced back to my companions, who all nodded. We stood with our coffees and left the coffee shop. As the doors swung shut behind us, I stole a final glance inside. The woman was typing something on a cell phone.

The sky had almost darkened completely now. There was no moon, making that darkness even more ominous above the streetlights. I huddled in my jacket, suddenly feeling even colder than the weather could make me. Chase hustled us all forward.

“We need to go,” he said quietly.

I felt eyes on me. I glanced across the street to see a pale-skinned man with a buzz-cut, dressed in a dark colored suit. He stood

watching us from a corner almost out of reach of the nearest streetlight. I suppressed a shudder.

"You don't have to tell me twice," I mumbled as we cut around a street corner towards the parking lot.

I came to a skidding halt as soon as we went around the corner, right as we came face to face with none other than my friendly neighbor Brian. I quickly managed to close my gaping jaw and recover. Then I proceeded to brush by him without giving him a single extra glance of recognition.

"Seriously Xoe?" he called from behind us.

I paused long enough to turn and face him. "Sorry, didn't know if talking to you might be too *weird*." I held up my arms to gesture to the streets around us. "And we're obviously not behind closed doors."

Taking a great deal of satisfaction in Brian's stunned expression, I turned back around and we continued walking as if nothing had happened. Well I acted as if nothing had happened. Lucy and Max were grinning from ear-to-ear. I wished I could smile too, but I had just caught sight of crew-cut man across the street.

We walked un-accosted the rest of the way to the truck. I handed Chase the keys, feeling too shaken to drive. We all piled in and let out a shared breath as the truck started and we pulled out of the lot. Lucy had opted for the other pull down seat in the back rather than squeezing in the middle of the front again.

"Do you see anyone?" Chase asked.

We all looked out the windows as we pulled onto the street that would lead us back to the highway. The early bar crowd was beginning to pour in, but no one seemed to pay us any mind.

"I don't know," I answered. "Did you notice the guy on the street corner? I think he followed us down the block."

Chase nodded. Lucy and Max remained silent. My shoulders eased as we merged onto the highway.

Max popped his head up amongst us in the front seat. "I didn't recognize the smell. She smelled like ozone and blood."

"Blood?" Lucy asked nervously.

"Yeah," Max went on, "and something else I couldn't quite place, kinda like cinnamon or something."

"What do we do now?" I asked.

Chase spared me a quick glance. "We should call your dad, at least let him know what we've found."

I nodded to myself. "Okay, we'll let him know. But after that, what do we do?"

We were nearing the exit to my neighborhood. Chase was silent. He glanced at the rearview mirror, then sped right past the exit.

"Umm . . . " I began.

Chase sped up. “Someone’s following us.”

I turned to look out the back windshield as Lucy and Max did the same. We were on the highway, and even though Shelby’s highway is relatively small, there were still several cars in the lanes behind us. “Which one?” I asked.

Chase glanced in the mirror. “Dark blue minivan.”

I turned back toward Chase. “Seriously? We’re being followed by a *minivan*?”

Chase nodded, then took the exit that would lead us to the abandoned industrial district. I hated the industrial district. It was the place where Lucy had first turned into a werewolf. I hated it almost as much as I hated the graveyard . . . almost. The minivan exited right behind us.

We reached the two-lane road of the industrial district and began to speed down the dilapidated street. I had a brief moment to wonder why of all exits Chase would pick the traffic-less industrial district, then the truck was spinning in a tight u-turn. The tires came to a screeching halt. A few seconds later the minivan sped right past us. They were going so fast they would have hit us had we simply decided to brake in front of them. Before the minivan could manage to slow enough to turn around, Chase sped back down the road and onto the exit ramp, going the wrong way.

“What are you doing!” I screamed, frantically holding on to the sides of my seat.

Chase ignored me, his full attention focused on the road. He picked up even more speed as we approached the highway and oncoming traffic. I cursed silently to myself. We were going to die. The minivan had caught back up, and was following close behind us.

Chase shot out onto the highway, right in front of a red sports car whose driver held down on his horn until we cleared that side of the highway. Chase eased the truck into traffic, heading back the way we had just come.

I slowly unclenched my fingers from the seat cushion, and turned to look back at Max and Lucy. Their faces had drained of color, and both held identical, horror-stricken expressions. I turned my attention back to Chase, who was looking out the rear-view mirror with a tense squint to his eyes.

“Are you completely insane?” I asked.

He didn’t answer right away. I stole a quick glance behind us. The minivan was nowhere in sight. Chase nodded to himself, satisfied. “I think we lost them.”

I snorted in disbelief. “Yeah, and we almost lost our lives too.”

Chase ignored my comment. “My guess is that we just had a close brush with the infamous abductors.”

"Why were they following us?" I asked.

Chase glanced at me before taking an exit that would lead us to the larger part of Shelby where Irvine's pizza was. "Well, they've abducted witches, werewolves, and merpeople, so it's safe to say they have a way of identifying supernaturals. They've been picking them off one by one. Now they've found four of us together."

"Where are we going?" Lucy chimed in.

Chase took a left turn, then sped up and took a quick right. "I want to make sure no one's following us before we go back to Xoe's."

"What do we do then?" I asked.

Chase took another left, leading us farther away from the highway. "We call your dad."

"And?" I pressed.

Chase pursed his lips in frustration. "And that's it," he answered. "I've put you in enough danger already. We shouldn't have come."

"We had to come," I countered. "They have Lela. Who knows what they're doing to her? We don't even know if she's still alive."

A chill went down my spine. There was a very real possibility that Lela was dead. I should have listened to my dad. We should have made a plan to stick together as soon as we found out about the abductions.

"We should go back to the coffee shop," I suggested. "We can wait until that girl leaves, then we can follow her."

Chase sighed, then lifted off the seat to dig in his pants' pocket. He pulled out a slim black cell phone and handed it to me. "Call your dad. His number is in the contacts list."

I stared at the cell phone for a minute before flipping it open. Lucy and Max were completely silent in the backseat. *Alexondre* was the first name on the short list of contacts. I selected his name and pushed the call button before I had a chance to think better of it.

He picked up on the first ring. "Where are you? I've been trying to find you, but you keep moving."

"What?" I asked, confused. "How'd you know we were moving?"

"Alexondra?" he inquired. Then before I could answer he went on, "You were supposed to stay home. Where are you?"

"We're driving," I snapped. "We found the abductors at Blue Moon coffee shop. We're going back to follow them."

"Absolutely not," he snapped back. "Where is Chase? Let me talk to him."

I extended the phone out to Chase, who took it while glaring at me. We were reaching the end of town and entering a wealthy residential area. The manicured lawns and white picket fences seemed sorely out of place with what was going on.

"Would you rather I had let her go alone?" Chase argued with the

phone. He paused to listen, then nodded to himself. “We have the other two wolves with us.” He listened to the phone for another minute then handed it back to me.

“What?” I asked after I pushed the phone against my ear.

My dad grunted at my rudeness. “You will all be returning to your home now. I’m going to the coffee shop.”

“Then we’ll meet you there,” I argued.

“No,” was his only reply.

“We can help!” I practically shouted.

“Think Alexondra,” he replied calmly. “They know what you look like. They haven’t seen me yet. I will be able to follow them.”

I let out a frustrated breath. He was right, and oh how it rankled. “Fine,” I grumbled. “And don’t call me Alexondra,” I added, but he had already hung up.

Chase had navigated his way through the residential area, only to end up at the mall. I gave a confused look as we entered the mall parking lot. I had never known about this round-about way to get to the mall. He shrugged at my look. Apparently he hadn’t known either.

“Why are we going to the mall?” Max asked, startling me. I had forgotten that Lucy and him were back there.

“We’re not,” Chase answered. “We’re going to take the back way to Xoe’s. I don’t want to risk being seen on the highway.”

We drove straight through the mall parking lot and out the back exit that led to the forest road we had taken before. A question I had came back to me. “How was my dad planning to find us? How did he know that we were moving?”

Chase shrugged. “It’s a demon thing. We can sense each other.”

“Could you find me like that?” I asked.

“Probably,” he answered. “It gets easier to sense you the longer I know you, only when you’re awake though. It has something to do with the brainwaves.”

Now *that* was creepy. I didn’t think I liked the idea of my dad and Chase being able to find me wherever I went, though I guess I didn’t really have a choice.

Lucy leaned forward to rest her chin on the back of the front seat. “Could you find one of us?” she asked. “Someone who isn’t part demon?”

I knew she was thinking about Lela. Chase shook his head apologetically. “No.”

I couldn’t believe how calmly we were conversing. I couldn’t believe how calm I felt, how unafraid. My once normal friends and I had adapted to a completely new life, a life where kidnappings and high-speed chases were nothing to get too worked up about. Heck, even Allison had adapted, and she was human.

I turned to share a knowing look with Lucy. Just call us Electra Woman and Dyna Girl.

CHAPTER TEN

It was full dark by the time we reached my house, and my dad still hadn't called. I noticed that my mom's car had returned to its normal spot as we parked in my driveway. We walked inside my dimly lit house to the sound of Christmas music.

I stifled a groan when I realized that the dim lighting was candlelight, with our colorfully decorated artificial tree as the brightly lit centerpiece. The smell of baked goods was in the air, and I knew something was wrong right there. My mom almost never baked. The last time she had baked was the morning after the Dan incident. I had broken my arm and my mom was forced to come home from a business trip in Washington to bail me out of the hospital.

My mom emerged from the kitchen in a red and green apron with matching pot-holders, a pan of chocolate chip cookies grasped between her protected hands. "Cookies?" she offered, her smile a little too wide. It had to be overwhelming for her, being confronted by my friends and me now that she knew what we were. Well, she didn't know what Chase was, but I'm sure she had her suspicions.

I forced myself to smile. "Um, sure."

My mom took that as answer enough and turned to go back into the kitchen. Lucy and I followed her in while Chase and Max went to sit in the living room. My mom set the pan of cookies onto the stove, then looked startled when she turned around to see Lucy and me behind her.

My mom pulled a spatula out of the cylinder that holds our cooking utensils and began lifting the cookies onto a large red plate. "Does everyone want milk?" she asked. "I made cinnamon rolls too. Oh, and we could have coffee . . . "

"Okay mom," I interrupted. "Why don't you let Lucy and me handle this? You can go talk to Max and Chase."

She nodded. "Oh, okay." She nodded again to herself and exited the kitchen.

Lucy's eyes followed her out with a worried cast to them. Lucy turned her almond shaped brown eyes back to me. "Your mom is acting really weird . . . and where's Jason?"

"She knows everything," I began. I ignored Lucy's gaping jaw and

went on, “and Jason has a job. He had to leave town.”

“Wait, what?” Lucy stuttered. “You told her? And how could Jason leave? We need him here.” She pointed her finger dramatically at the ground.

I started shoveling the rest of the cookies onto the plate, but then paused to go to the adjacent counter and start a pot of coffee. Lucy followed right behind me, still waiting for an explanation. I gave her a tired expression as I poured beans into the coffee grinder. “He had to go. Who knows when another job will come along? He has to take what he can get.”

Lucy put a hand on her hip and looked at me skeptically. “It doesn’t sound like you really believe that.”

I shook my head. “I believe it. I know he had to go, but it doesn’t make me feel any better about it.”

“Have you called him to let him know what’s going on?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Xoe!” she exclaimed. She cringed and lowered her voice. “You need to call him. He’s going to be furious when he finds out that you were in danger and didn’t tell him.”

“I know,” I conceded as I filled the pot with water and pressed the start button. “But I can take care of myself.”

“And you wouldn’t mind making him a little furious?” Lucy added.

I thought about it for a moment. I was pissed that he left right after my dad came into town. I had to admit, the idea of making Jason angry was rather appealing. I laughed a harsh sound that didn’t really sound like a laugh at all. “Yeah, that too.”

Lucy shook her head in exasperation, but let the subject drop. “What exactly did you tell your mom?”

I went back to shoveling cookies, and Lucy once again followed me. “Pretty much everything,” I answered. “Except for what happened with Dan.”

Lucy shooed me to the side so she could open the oven and pull out the cinnamon rolls with one of my mom’s oven mitts. She placed them onto the now empty cookie pan. I searched the cabinets until I found a large plastic platter to put them on. As Lucy lifted the cinnamon rolls off the pan, I got out mugs for everyone to have coffee or milk.

Lucy stopped me before I headed into the living room with the mugs. “Is that why she’s baking?” she whispered.

I nodded. “She likes to be occupied when she’s trying to cope with something.”

I grabbed a stack of paper plates to put under my arm, then took the mugs into the living room and handed them out, leaving the last

two on the coffee table for Lucy and me. Chase and Max were on the large blue sofa, looking uncomfortable as my mom made conversation with them from her perch on the smaller green loveseat. Lucy emerged from the kitchen a moment later with the tray of cookies and a jug of milk. I handed my mom the plates, then set the tray on the coffee table for Lucy. I went back to the kitchen alone for the cinnamon rolls and coffee.

I re-entered the living room and squeezed the cinnamon rolls onto the coffee table beside the cookies, but had to settle with leaving the coffee pot on our single end table. Everyone had already filled their mugs with milk, leaving me with the entire pot of coffee to myself. I was on a bit of a coffee overload already, but hey, it helped me cope. Some people bake, some people drink coffee.

Lucy had taken the seat by my mom, so I sat next to Max on the couch. My mom smiled at all of us, some of her usual warmth creeping through. “Where’s Allison?” she asked.

I turned to Lucy. “Where *is* Allison?”

Lucy cocked her head as she reached for a cinnamon roll to put on the plate my mom had handed her. “You know what? I haven’t heard from her all day.”

“I’ll call her,” Max added, anticipating our worry. Plus, he was always willing to call Allison. I sensed a crush, but he never openly admitted it. He stood up to go to the phone and I busied myself with piling several cookies and a cinnamon roll onto my plate. Max took the phone into the kitchen.

My mom turned her attention to Lucy. “So you’re a werewolf then?”

Lucy choked on her bite of cinnamon roll, then took a big gulp of milk to wash it down. She set her plate in her lap and nervously brushed a strand of her straight dark hair behind her ear. “Um . . . yeah, yes I am.”

My mom smiled again, looking almost demented with nerves. “And Max too?”

Max came back into the room with the phone and distractedly answered my mom. “Yeah, I am too.” He turned his gaze to me. “Allison went with Lela to her job interview.”

My mom turned to me. “Lela? Is that the woman who was here before?”

I nodded in response and began to stand. My mom mirrored me, but then Chase came to the rescue and asked her about her work, forcing her to remain in the living room out of politeness. I grabbed Max and dragged him back into the kitchen.

“She never came home?” I prodded in a hoarse whisper. My heart was racing with adrenaline. I already knew the answer.

Max shook his head. “No. Her parents aren’t worried yet. They figure she’s still just hanging out with Lela. I didn’t tell them any different, but I imagine they’ll call the cops if she’s not home within the next few hours.”

I clenched back the first of my tears. “What are we going to do?” I breathed.

Max’s pale green eyes glistened with unshed tears as well. It was like Allison was already dead. Please don’t let her be dead.

“What about the coalition?” Max whispered.

“Even if they could get here in time, I don’t even know how to get a hold of them.”

“Where’s Jason?” he asked, as if just realizing what was missing from the situation. I couldn’t blame him, we hadn’t had much time to stop and think lately.

“He’s on a job,” I answered dejectedly as a cursed tear slipped out.

“Everything all right in there?” my mom called.

“Fine mom!” I yelled back.

I heard Chase’s voice rise with his next question to distract my mom again.

Max waved his hand in my face to bring my attention back to him. “Call him,” he demanded.

“It’s not going to do any good,” I argued.

“Call him,” Max intoned again, this time slapping the portable phone into my palm.

With a quivering sigh, I turned my back on Max and punched in the cell phone number I knew by heart.

He picked up on the second ring. “Xoe?”

“Yeah,” I breathed. “It’s me.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Something is wrong. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Lela and Allison are both missing,” I answered. “We’re pretty positive they’ve been abducted.”

“I’m coming home,” he said gravely, not missing a beat. “I’m in New York. It’s going to take me a day or so to get there.”

“It’s okay,” I answered, tears flowing freely. “We just need Abel’s number.”

“Do you have a pen?” he asked.

I peeked around the corner to the living room and grabbed a pen and paper from beside the phone cradle. I nodded, then realizing he couldn’t see it, answered, “Yeah, I’ve got one.”

He rattled off the number to me, then asked, “Where are Lucy and Max? You should all stick together.”

“They’re here,” I answered, then after a moment of hesitation added, “Chase is here too.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Jason?" I questioned.

"Yes," he mumbled. "Yes I'm still here. It's good that he's there. You must stay together in your home. Don't go anywhere. Call Abel and I'll be there as soon as possible."

I scrunched my nose in agitation. Like I couldn't have figured that all out on my own.

"Xoe?" Jason inquired.

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

My heart sped even faster, if that was possible. He'd never told me he loved me before. I had to clear my throat before I spoke. "I, um, I love you too."

"I'll see you soon," he said. The line went dead.

I slumped back against the countertop, feeling like I had just run a marathon. Max was staring at me. "What?" I snapped.

He shook his head in exasperation. "Are you going to call Abel or what?"

I gave Max my best withering glare, though the tears probably lessened the effect. Boys can be so insensitive. I looked down at the forgotten paper in my hand. I glared back up at Max and dialed the numbers. A machine picked up after the first ring. A cultured woman's voice flowed out of the receiver, "Please leave your name, number, and a brief message." That was it, no explanation of whose machine I had reached. I just had to trust that I had the right number.

"Um, this is Xoe Meyers," I mumbled into the machine. "I'm trying to get a hold of Abel. I don't know if my dad already called, but we're having some trouble here in Shelby, the type of trouble that I think you are technically supposed to help us with." I gave the machine Max's cell phone number and hung up.

I let out a loud sigh to steady myself, then looked back to Max. "What are we going to do about Allison's parents? We're not supposed to get the police involved in this sort of stuff."

Max shrugged. "Maybe getting the cops involved wouldn't be such a bad thing. They might be able to help."

I shook my head. It *would* be much simpler if we could leave it to the cops, but we couldn't. It was supernatural commandment number one to keep humans uninvolved. Plus, if the cops were brought in, we wouldn't get the coalition's help, and werewolves had a much better chance of finding Allison and Lela alive.

"We can't," I answered simply, too tired to explain my whole thought process.

Max frowned at my answer. "Well then what are we going to tell her parents?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration. “If we tell them anything, and we . . . ” I choked on my words, emotion bubbling up anew, “and we can’t find her,” I managed to whisper, “then the cops will be knocking at our door.”

Max looked up from where he had been gazing at the floor. “We can’t tell her parents anything,” he declared. “If they call the cops, then it’s just humans calling human cops, and I still think it can’t hurt to have them involved.”

After a moment of silence I nodded. “You’re right. Screw the rules. The coalition should have been up here trying to find the abductors as soon as that witch went missing in Bear Creek.”

That elicited a small smile from Max. He gave me a light punch on the shoulder. “Now that’s the Xoe we know and love.”

I smiled back at Max. I left the phone on the counter and went through the dining room to bypass the living room on my way to the guest bathroom. Once inside, I did a quick mirror check to dry any leftover tears, then I went back to the living room.

My mom was leaning forward from her perch on the loveseat, grilling Chase on what he knew about owls of all things. Max had resumed his seat next to Chase. I cleared my throat as I approached the seating area, drawing everyone’s attention to me.

I met Chase’s dark gray eyes. “Hey Chase,” I began, “you think I could recruit you to help me wrap some Christmas presents? I don’t want anyone to see what they got.”

Chase nodded and smiled pleasantly at my mom before standing. I picked up some wrapping supplies from where my mom had put them near the tree. With the wrapping supplies under my arm, I headed upstairs with Chase following shortly behind, leaving Max and Lucy to fend off my mom.

As soon as we were shut inside my room, I spun on Chase. “Call my dad. Allison’s missing. We can’t just keep waiting around.”

His eyes widened in surprise, but he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and punched the buttons that would connect him to my dad. Chase’s forehead scrunched in concern as my dad answered.

“Their human friend is missing,” Chase began without even a hello. He met my eyes. “I don’t think your daughter will be content with sitting around and doing nothing for much longer.”

I turned and looked out my large window while Chase listened to my dad. It took me a moment to realize that it was snowing outside. I huddled in my red sweater, even though it wasn’t cold in my room. Chase clicked the phone shut and I turned my attention back to him.

“Your dad followed the woman from the coffee shop, but she just went to a bar afterward. He saw another man watching her that he thinks isn’t human, but the man simply followed her to the bar and is

now waiting across the street. Your dad thinks they're being careful since we got away. They know we're on to them."

I scrunched my eyebrows together in concerned confusion. "Is this good or bad?"

Chase grimaced. "It could be good in the sense that they're possibly scared, which means that they are perhaps not as powerful as we think. But it's bad in the sense that their fear of exposure might cause them to rush. If Allison and Lela are alive, they may not be for much longer."

I dropped down onto my bed, feeling dizzy. This could not be happening, not again. When Lucy had been taken by Dan, I felt like the world was going to end, but at least then we had hope. We had Lela to lead us right to Lucy. We knew the bad guy we were dealing with.

"We have to go," I said numbly.

Chase shook his head. "We can't. We have no idea where they are."

"We have to get the woman," I countered. "She's our only lead."

"Kidnap the kidnapper?" Chase asked skeptically.

I glared at him. "You got a better idea?"

He shook his head. "We're not going to get by your dad. We'll have to convince him to help."

I smiled. "If I go after the woman myself, he won't really have a choice."

Chase stood and offered me a hand up from the bed. I took it gratefully, not caring if he knew how badly my knees were shaking. We were going into the den of the lion after all.

Here's hoping we didn't get bit.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I left my room and crept as silently as I could down the stairs. My mom was still in the living room talking to Lucy and Max, so all of us just sneaking out wasn't an option. It was almost nine, and I knew my mom wouldn't allow us to go out that late. My only option was to have Max, and Chase "go home," then Lucy and I could sneak out. I'd have Lucy pretend to go home too, but it made more sense to have my mom think she was spending the night at our house, then if Lucy's parents called, we'd have a cover.

"You want to stay the night, Lucy?" I asked as I entered the room. Chase came into the room right behind me. I hadn't even realized that he'd been standing behind me on the stairs.

A look of confusion crossed Lucy's face, then she caught on. "Sure Xoe." She turned to my mom. "If that's okay with you."

"Of course!" My mom beamed. "You're always welcome. You know you don't have to ask."

Lucy smile was a little sickly. "I'll call my mom."

Chase brushed past me to face my mom. "Max and I better get going," he began. "Thanks for the cookies."

My mom turned her beaming smile toward Chase. She seemed to have settled back into her comfort zone, pretending we were all just a bunch of normal humans. Chase went for the door, then waited while Max said bye to my mom before heading out. My mom rejected our offers to help her clean up, so Lucy and I went up to my room.

"What's going on?" Lucy asked as soon as I shut my door.

"My dad followed the woman from the coffee shop to a bar. We're going to confront her, and quite possibly kidnap her."

Lucy's jaw dropped. "*What*?"

"Chase thinks that we might have spooked the abductors into acting. Whatever they're planning to do with Allison and Lela, they're probably going to rush into it now."

"So they do have Allison then?"

I nodded somberly. "I think so."

"But she's human," Lucy argued.

"I know," I replied. "I don't know why they took her too. Maybe she just got in the way."

“So we’re sneaking out?”

I nodded. “As soon as my mom goes to sleep.”

We went through the motions of getting ready for bed. I let Lucy borrow some pajamas, and by the time my mom peeked her head in to say goodnight, we were all tucked in and ready to “sleep”.

We waited another twenty minutes to ensure that my mom was in bed, then, leaving the light off, got up and quietly changed back into our clothes. I pulled my slouchy boots back on, then added an insulated, waterproof black jacket to protect me from the cold. I tossed Lucy another winter coat and we were ready to go. Now for the tricky part.

Max and Jason usually just hopped out my second story window to sneak out of my room, but Lucy and I hadn’t quite mastered that trick, despite the fact that we were supposed to be physically capable.

I peeked out my bedroom door to make sure we were all clear, then quickly pulled my head back in and shut the door as silently as possible. I turned to Lucy and whispered almost noiselessly, knowing she’d be able to hear, “She’s still awake. Her door is open and her light is on.”

Lucy looked worried. “What do we do?” she whispered back louder than I had. My hearing was good, but it was nowhere near werewolf hearing. They had me beat in the smell department too.

I glanced at my window and raised my eyebrows in question.

“No way,” Lucy mouthed.

I looked at the window again, pursed my lips and nodded. We were going to do it. Ignoring Lucy’s protests, I put some pillows under my comforter in case my mom glanced in my room, and slowly opened my window.

Lucy came to stand beside me, sliding on the red winter coat I had given her. “No way, Xoe. We can’t make it.”

I ignored her and lifted my feet out of the window, bracing myself to sit on the sill. I glanced back at Lucy’s expression and held up my crossed fingers for her to see. I took a deep breath and pushed off against the side of the house. I was airborne for a brief freezing moment, then my feet hit the ground. My momentum sent me tumbling a few feet through the fresh snow to land on my side in a heap. I took a moment to survey how my body felt, and a smile crossed my face as I realized I was unharmed.

I stood and brushed the snow off my jeans, then turned to look up at my window. Lucy was still fully inside, a look of shock on her face. I did a little ‘ta-dah’ gesture, pointed at Lucy, then pointed at the ground beside me.

She shook her head and stepped back from the window. She raised her hands in a pushing ‘no thanks’ gesture. There was no way I had

jumped out that window for nothing. I stomped my foot in frustration, and once again pointed at Lucy, then at the ground beside me.

After several more minutes of silent arguing, Lucy finally eased her feet out the window and sat on the sill like I had. She reached behind her to slide the window closed as much as she could while still leaving room for her butt on the sill.

Finally, she closed her eyes and I watched her face, knowing she was counting to three. Then she threw herself away from the house. She dropped straight down with her long hair flowing above her head, and landed lightly on her feet, dipping into a crouch to lessen the impact on her legs. I swore out loud, that was *so* not fair.

I pouted while I waited for Lucy to come stand beside me, then we started toward the road where we would meet Max and Chase. My mind raced with what we were about to do. I wished Jason was with us despite myself.

Chase's old, beat-up truck was already waiting for us by the time we reached the road. I opened the passenger door to a blast of heated air, then waited for Lucy to climb in ahead of me. She chose to sit in the middle of the front seat again, rather than in the back jump-seats with Max.

We were all silent as Chase put the truck in drive and headed toward town. I fidgeted around anxiously until I couldn't keep my mouth shut any longer.

"Okay," I began, "so here's what I'm thinking. I go in and talk to the redhead, and let her lure me wherever. You guys stay out of sight, then follow us."

"So you'd be like . . . bait?" Lucy squeaked.

"No," Max interjected. "I'll do it."

I turned around so I could meet his scared eyes. "Why should you do it? I'm your pack leader after all. I'm supposed to protect you."

Max sighed. "You're only our pack leader in name, Xoe. We don't actually expect you to protect us. Plus, they've only taken witches, werewolves, and merpeople. They may not even want you."

"He's right," Chase added. "The plan has a better chance of working if Max goes in."

Pouting, I hunched down in my seat and glared out the front window as we exited onto the highway. Lucy cleared her throat and I turned to regard her.

"Aren't we forgetting something?" Lucy asked rhetorically.

I cocked my head in confusion at the same time Max asked, "What?"

"That woman is in a bar," she reminded us. "None of us can get into a bar."

"I can," Chase countered.

I turned to him in confusion. “How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-two,” he answered simply.

Lucy cleared her throat again. “That still brings us back to the problem of having a demon go in.”

“I can get into a stupid bar,” Max mumbled petulantly.

I turned back to Max. “You willing to try?”

He met my eyes, showing me the raw fear shining through. “Yes,” he agreed.

Chase shook his head in disbelief. “Okay,” he conceded. “We’ll try.”

The rest of the drive was a short one. We didn’t know which bar the redhead was at, so we’d park in the same lot as before, and look for my dad.

We reached the lot to find the bar traffic in full swing. We had to search for a while before we found a spot. Once we did, Chase backed into the spot, for a quick get-away I assumed, and shut off the engine. I opened the door and hopped out just before the cold air really hit me. Sporadic snowflakes had begun to fall once again, and I wished I was back in my house, having cookies and coffee with my mom.

I snuggled the zipper on my winter coat all the way up to my throat and waited for Lucy to get out behind me. Chase and Max came around the truck to fetch us.

“We stick together,” Chase ordered. “It may take us a little longer to find Alexondre, but we can’t risk another one of us being taken.”

I shrugged. “Why don’t you just *sense* him?”

Chase looked embarrassed. “He can block me.”

A faint wash of hope ran through me, tainted by my current, more pressing fears. “So I could in theory block him?”

Shrugging, Chase answered, “In theory maybe, but it takes a very powerful demon to be able to do so. I’ve only heard of pureblood demons having the ability.”

“Can’t we just call him?” Max interrupted, impatient to get the show on the road. “It’s freezing out here.”

I answered before Chase could. “He’s not going to tell us where he is. He didn’t want us to come.”

Max nodded and we all began to walk toward the sidewalk. Without discussion, we strolled up the street toward Blue Moon, trying to act casual and inconspicuous. The streets were full of bar-goers and a few lingering coffee shop patrons with laptops or books in hand. People who would normally seem innocuous to me, all suddenly had hidden agendas of nefarious deeds. Was that woman in the black velvet coat looking at me funny? I stepped a little closer to Lucy, wanting to feel the comfort of being in a group.

We were only a block away from the coffee shop when Chase took

a sudden right, and gestured for us all to cluster into an alcove that housed an ATM. We all smushed in and looked at him curiously. He gestured with a nod down the street we had just turned onto.

I peeked around the corner and saw my dad, leaning against a wall a few buildings down. As I watched, he pulled a cell phone out of his black linen trench coat and dialed a number. A second later, Chase's phone began to ring.

Chase cringed and reached into his back pocket, then held the cell phone out to me. I flipped it open and held it to my ear. "I told you to stay home Alexondra," my dad's voice lectured.

I shut the phone and handed it back to Chase. He looked at me wide-eyed as I flipped my hood up over my head and left the alcove, marching straight for my dad. He pretended not to notice me as I walked down the street to meet him.

I stopped and leaned against the wall a few feet away from him. "Max is going in," I whispered. If there were any werewolves around, they'd probably hear me, but it was the best I could do.

My dad nodded, the barest inclination of his head. "You are staying out here with me," he whispered.

It was my turn to nod. I looked back toward the alcove to see Max emerging. Good, they were putting the plan into action. I casually tugged my hood down my forehead a little further, trying to mask my blonde hair in case one of the abductors recognized me.

There wasn't anyone checking IDs at the door, and Max strode right in. I waited, expecting Max to be thrown out any minute, but nothing happened. Another five minutes went by. Still nothing.

I glanced around to see if anyone else was watching the bar and caught sight of Chase as he crossed the street. He had produced a black winter cap from somewhere, and pulled it down a little further over his ears as he went to sit on a park bench, then started pretending to text on his phone. Or who knew? Maybe he was texting.

I got my answer when my dad's phone buzzed from somewhere within his trench coat. He pulled out the phone and quickly read the message. He moved closer to me as he shoved the phone back in his pocket. I ignored him until he placed a hand on my shoulder to turn me to walk with him.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

My dad pushed me forward to quicken our pace. "Max and the woman are behind the bar."

"Already?" I whispered harshly.

"He must have followed her straight out there as soon as he entered," my dad explained. "It was a trap."

I glanced to the park bench where Chase was sitting, but he had already disappeared. Standing in his place was the crew-cut man that

had followed us before. He watched my dad and me as we crossed the street. Crap.

I stopped suddenly on the median to tie my shoe and my dad came to a skidding halt. I looked up and met his eyes that so eerily matched mine. “He’s one of them, the one standing by the bench.”

My dad glanced at the man, then pulled me to my feet to stroll a little more slowly the rest of the way across the road. We made our way to a little alley that ran alongside the bar. I glanced back in search of crew-cut man. He was walking right toward us. Double-crap.

My dad shoved me into the alleyway ahead of him, then stayed where he was standing. I looked at him, confused.

“Go,” he ordered. “Find Chase.” Then he turned to meet crew-cut man head on.

I went. I could only hope that crew-cut man wouldn’t try anything too drastic in public.

I ran full out down the alleyway until I reached the back parking lot of the bar. I felt a prickling at the back of my neck. I whipped around and looked back down the alleyway. My dad was nowhere to be seen. I turned back around and was shocked to find dark brown eyes, just inches from my face.

I froze, heart thundering a million miles a minute. Then I realized that it was Nick standing in front of me. “You scared me!” I exclaimed.

He just stood there as a slow smile crept across his face.

Only then did it dawn on me that we hadn’t told Nick where we were going. I started to back up, but for every step I took back, he took one forward. “You’re one of them,” I accused.

His smile grew as he continued to walk forward.

I turned to run, and caught a glimpse of someone large behind me. Then there was only darkness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I could hear an engine humming, trying to lull me back to sleep, but there was a dull ache in my head that told me I needed to wake up. I opened my eyes, but couldn't lift my head off the floor. I groggily looked around at my metal surroundings and realized I was in the back of a van. Wait, what was I doing in the back of a van?

Suddenly Nick's face was once again in front of mine and it all came flooding back to me. The traitor! I tried to speak, but it felt like my mouth was full of cotton.

Nick's face disappeared. A moment later I heard him speak. "She's coming to."

A woman's voice responded, "What the hell is she? Her metabolism has eaten up enough tranqs to down three werewolves."

Tranquilizers? This was bad, very bad. I began to struggle, but my limbs felt like they were made of rubber, and there was some type of restraint holding my hands behind my back. I managed to swing my leg enough to kick someone, then there were hands holding down my legs. I took a breath to try and scream, then there was a small zing of pain in my arm. My vision began to go dark. I blinked against it. I had to stay awake. Then I was out.

When I next awoke, I was in some sort of cell. The ground beneath me was cold, damp stone. I forced my eyes open only to find someone crouching over me. I swung my leg up as best I could in an attempt to kick whoever it was. My knee made contact, instead of my foot like I had intended, and the person fell away with a yelp.

"What gives?" a female voice demanded.

"Allison?" I questioned.

"Duh," came a sarcastic reply. "Don't try to kick me this time."

She crouched back over me and put her hands under my arms to lift me into a seated position. She leaned me against the stone wall, then sat down in front of me. I felt a wash of heat and glanced to see a small propane heater in the corner of the room, near the door, which I couldn't really think of as a door. It was made of shiny, new steel bars. There was some sort of lighting in the outer room, but the only extra lighting in the cell was the glow of the space heater.

I turned my gaze back to Allison, who was dressed in a dirty, long

sleeve tee that had once been a pale blue, and torn jeans that had soaked up blood from some sort of wound or cut on her leg. It pained me somehow to see Allison this way. She always put so much effort into her clothing.

I looked at her bloody leg again. “What happened?”

Allison bit her lip and glanced at her leg. “I just woke up with it. Some kind of puncture wound, but not too deep.”

I forced my eyes up to focus in on her grime-smeared face to ask another question. “Where are we?”

“We don’t know. We just woke up here.”

I was about to ask who “we” was, but then I saw Lela. She was huddled in the far corner with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her head was hanging forward, causing her long dark hair to fall around her like a cape.

“Lela?” I questioned.

“Hi Xoe,” Lela whispered back, clearly freaked out.

I looked back to Allison. “What did they do to her?” I whispered, even though I knew Lela would hear.

Allison shook her head. “She’s claustrophobic. We think we’re underground.”

Come to think of it, there did seem to be a slight lack of air. Not enough to harm us, but still uncomfortable. There was a familiar sensation prickling at the back of my mind. The air felt heavy, like something was pressing down on me. Then it hit me where I had felt that feeling before. Lucy’s grandma’s funeral.

“We’re in the cemetery . . . under the cemetery.”

Allison’s honey brown eyes widened. “We’re where?”

I licked my lips nervously. “I um . . . I think we’re in a crypt.”

“Great, just great,” another voice said sarcastically.

Wait, I knew that voice. “Brian?” I questioned.

Brian crawled into my line of vision and sat in front of me. His gray hoodie was torn and his hair was mussed into a frizzy pouf, but other than that, he looked unharmed. “So we’re in a crypt huh?”

I cringed at his tone, then nodded in affirmation. “What are you doing here?”

Brian shrugged, an unpleasant, sour look on his face. “First I ran into you on the street, then, as soon as you walked away, some guy pulled me into an alley. The next thing I knew, I was waking up . . . in a crypt.”

Lela let out a small whimper. My limbs tingled as feeling returned to them. Unfortunately the feeling was returning to my head as well. I reached back and felt the tender lump that had erupted on my scalp.

Allison and Brian were both staring at me.

“Have either of you seen anyone since you woke up?” I asked.

Allison was first to answer. “Yeah, Nick. The little worm told us if we used any magic, they’d know. Apparently nobody bothered to tell him that I’m human, so he just assumed otherwise.” She scowled at the room in general and then added, “They don’t know what you are either, Xoe.”

“You’d think he would have just asked, back when we might have told him.”

Allison nodded. “Yeah, not the sharpest tool in the shed that one.”

“He did ask,” Lela interrupted from her corner. “I told him it was your choice if and when you wanted to tell him.”

I flashed back on Lela’s googly-eyed look for Nick. That she had kept my secret despite her feelings for him pushed Lela that last inch into my friend category. If we got out of this, I knew I could trust her.

I gave Lela a smile she didn’t see, then turned back to Allison. “I understand them not knowing my smell, but wouldn’t they know that you smell human?”

“Witches smell like humans, unless they’ve been doing a lot of magic.” Lela interjected softly.

Brian was absorbing our conversation with a look of confused wonder on his face. I spared him an apologetic smile, then turned to regard Lela again. “Did you recognize what any of them smelled like?”

“Nick is definitely a wolf,” Lela said sadly. “The other one I caught a whiff of had a smell I knew. Kind of like the smell right before it rains mixed with blood.”

“Like ozone maybe?” I asked. “That’s what Max said one of them smelled like.”

Lela gave a slight nod of her head in answer. “Dan smelled the same way after he summoned demons. He said it was from the magic.”

“Great, just great,” I replied. “So do we have any idea what they’re planning on doing with us?”

“Kill us, probably,” Lela mumbled.

Brian put his head in his hands, but didn’t say anything.

I wanted to argue, but Lela was right. All but one of the other abductees were yet to be found, and the one that was found was dead.

Allison glanced at the door, then back to me. “Can’t you blow it up or something?”

I raised my hand to pinch the bridge of my nose. I was getting a killer headache. “I don’t know how,” I groaned. “I’ve only blown up appliances, so I think it just has something to do with the electricity. Steel bars aren’t exactly combustable.”

“What about the space heater?” Lela asked, a little bit of the strength back in her voice.

I looked at the heater again. It wasn’t electric, but it *was*

flammable. “You might just have something there.”

I stumbled to my feet and Allison stood to aide me. “How did you get over the tranquilizers so fast? It took over an hour for Lela to be able to move at all. I was on the ground for another two after that. Brian finally just started moving before they threw you in here.”

“Who threw me in?” I asked.

Allison shrugged. “Some big guy,” she answered. “I’d never seen him before.”

Brian lifted his head out of his hands and looked at me standing awkwardly near the door. “What are you going to do?”

I shook my head and glanced at the heater again. “I don’t know. Can one of you help me move the space heater closer to the bars?”

Allison left me leaning against the wall as she went to move the heater. It was a lot heavier than it looked, so she had to slowly drag it across the floor rather than lifting it. It made a horrible scraping sound its entire journey to the door.

At the noise, a tall man with icy blue eyes and hair so blond it was almost white came around the corner into view through the barred door. He was also the largest man I had ever seen. When he spoke, his voice was a deep bass rumble. “What was that noise?” he asked with what sounded like a German accent.

“What noise?” I asked back.

“That scraping.”

“Oh,” I began, trying to think of an excuse. “We, um . . . we wanted to move the heater. We figured if we moved it in front of the door, less heat would escape. Where’s my dad?”

It took him a moment to adjust to my train of conversation. He was big, and none too bright.

Before he could answer, I asked, “What about the rest of my friends?”

“There are only you four,” he responded. He turned to walk away.

“Hold on,” I urged. “Why are we here?”

He stopped mid-motion and faced me again. “I’m not supposed to tell you.”

“What happened to my leg?” Allison quickly added.

The big man had the grace to look embarrassed. “I dropped you. There was a sharp piece of glass on the ground.”

Lela began to weep softly.

The big man pointed at her. “What’s wrong with that one?”

I couldn’t think of a reason not to tell him, and I wanted to keep him talking, so I answered honestly. “She’s claustrophobic.”

“Claude!” someone shouted from the outer room.

Claude winced, gave me a surprisingly sympathetic look, and walked away.

Back to the space heater idea. I motioned for Allison and Brian to stand back with Lela, then stumbled to sit several feet in front of the space heater. I stared into the glowing red panel, trying to grasp at my elusive powers, and felt . . . nothing.

I continued to focus, waiting for something to happen.

"What's wrong?" Allison whispered.

"I don't know," I answered. "I don't know how to do it."

"Don't you have to, you know, get angry?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I guess so, but I don't have much anger right now. I'm leaning more toward scared out of my wits."

"Think about something that makes you mad," Allison urged.

"I'm trying," I hissed.

"Try harder!" she shouted.

I whipped my head around to glare at her.

She put her hands up in surrender. "Sorry, just trying to make you mad."

I pouted, realizing that she almost had me when I ruined it.

"Xoe?" Brian questioned, letting his fear trickle into his voice. "What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing," I snapped without looking back at him.

"Can you believe Nick?" Allison interrupted. "He had us all fooled."

"Yeah, the weasel," I responded grumpily.

"He even gloated about it," she went on. "Said he couldn't believe how easily we let him in. That we were naïve and stupid to trust him like that."

I sighed loudly, depressed. "We were."

"So get mad about it," Allison urged.

"I can be mad about my own failure, but it's not something I'm going to lose my temper over."

"What are you trying to do?" Brian shouted.

I spun around to regard his scared, angry face. "Nothing!" I snapped again.

"Oh, and he said one more thing," Allison went on. "He told me that he could take you on with both hands tied behind his back."

"Stop it Allison!" Brian yelled. "What are you guys trying to do?"

"SHUT . . UP!" I shouted.

That was the spark I needed. I felt a thrill of electricity zing through my body, and suddenly the space heater exploded. It exploded . . . a little too much. A whoosh of roiling fire surrounded me, then in an instant was gone.

I waited for the pain to hit, and felt . . . nothing. I looked down at my hands, sure that I had to be burned, but they were their normal smooth whiteness.

“That hurt,” Allison said from behind me.

Uh oh. I stood up, feeling numb, and rushed to the corner where my friends had taken shelter. I crouched in front of them to survey the damage.

“I’m so sorry!” I exclaimed when I saw them.

Allison’s eyes were wide with shock. She held her hands up to her face, but didn’t touch her skin. “Is it bad?”

“No, um, not too bad,” I answered. “You just look kinda . . . pink.”

“I feel like I’m sunburned,” Brian added.

I heard shouting from the outer room. “Um guys,” I prompted, “we gotta go.”

Allison pushed against the wall to slowly get to her feet. I had to grab Lela’s hand and pull her up to get her moving.

“What do we do?” Lela shouted, only now snapping back to reality.

The shouting was getting closer.

Thinking quickly, I answered, “We’ve got to make way for Allison or Brian to get out. If we can’t all escape, they can tell the others where we are.”

With that I turned and ran to the cell door. The heater hadn’t actually done much damage, but it had broken the lock and latch, and one of the bottom hinges. The corner of the door scraped harshly against the stone floor as I pulled it open. The metal felt warm to the touch, but didn’t burn, either because it had cooled, or because I was a demon. At the moment, I didn’t really care.

I entered the larger stone room. It was almost as barren as our cell had been. A couch, mini-fridge, and another space heater were the only things in the empty space, plus another make-shift cell next to ours. Oh, and Claude. He had probably come to investigate the shouting and ended up too close to the blast. His large form was curled on the ground in agony, but it seemed like he’d live. I caught a single glimpse of his charred face, then extinguished my pang of guilt to turn my attention to the footsteps coming down a small stone staircase.

The first of our abductors to enter the room was Nick. I felt a smile spread across my face. We had to make our way out, and if I had to go through a person to do that, I was very glad that it was Nick.

He stood on the stairs, looking stunned to see all four of us out of our cell. He recovered quickly, and crouched into what looked like a professional fighting stance. I nervously tried to recall how I had blown up the space heater, but before I could do anything, Lela leapt on Nick with a shriek of anger. They tumbled sideways off the stairs to land in a writhing heap on the stone floor.

Lela ended up on top. I watched in terrified amusement as she cocked back one dainty fist, then started pummeling Nick in a blur of

motion. Shakespeare was right. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Deciding that Lela could handle Nick, I grabbed Allison and shoved her up the stairs ahead of me, then pulled Brian up behind me. We emerged into a small room that was thankfully above ground. There was no door, just a large frame leading out into the moonless night. We were close to freedom.

Just then, crew-cut man stepped into the doorway, blocking the entire opening with his broad shoulders. Lela came trotting up the stairs to stand slightly behind me.

"It's four to one," I said to the crew-cut man. "I suggest you move unless you want to end up like your friends."

"I don't think so," said a voice from behind the crew-cut man. The big man stepped through the doorway to reveal a tiny blonde woman. A tiny blonde woman with a gun.

She flipped her shoulder-length hair out of her face, then gestured with her gun that we should walk back down the stairs.

"That one stays up here," the big man said pointing to Allison.

The blonde woman gave him an angry glance, then gestured once again that we should go downstairs.

"They have Megan," he argued.

"You knew the risks when you took my money," blondie answered sharply.

"Kidnapping teenagers wasn't part of the deal. I'm going to get Megan back, then we're going to disappear.

"A trade?" the blondie asked without looking at him.

The man nodded and started to walk towards Allison.

"They'll never go for it," blondie taunted. "They won't trade just for one and let us keep the others."

"I have to try," the big man said angrily.

"Fine, try," she snapped. "But not yet. Take her somewhere, then go and offer them the trade in the morning. Just make sure they don't actually get her back until after tomorrow night." She turned back to Lela, Brian, and me. "You three, back downstairs."

What else could we do? Lela might survive a couple gun shots, heck I might too. I didn't really want to find out, but apparently Lela did. She leapt at the woman, completely ignoring the gun pointed right at her chest. The woman froze too long and didn't get a chance to shoot. They both tumbled out the doorway.

Allison took the opportunity to slip the big man's grasp and run for the door as well. He turned to go after her and I leapt onto his back, trying to buy her a few minutes. He struggled to reach his meaty arms behind his back to grab me, then finally just slammed his back against the wall, crushing the air out of me. I slid off his back to land in a

crouch, wincing at what was probably a broken rib.

As I tried to re-learn how to breathe, Brian came up behind the big man. He hefted a broken two-by-four he had found somewhere and swung it like a baseball bat to hit the man across the back of the head. The man barely flinched, then turned on Brian and swatted him as if he was an annoying insect. Brian went sailing right out the doorway. This guy was so obviously not human.

From my position on the ground, I lunged and grabbed the man's ankle. I was plenty mad now, and my powers came flowing easily through me. The smell of burning flesh crept up to my nostrils just as the man screamed and fell away from me. I lost my grip on his ankle as he tucked his feet beneath him to end up in a crouch.

Brian limped back into view. "Run!" I screamed.

I turned my attention back to crew-cut man. His eyes glazed with rage, he lunged for me again. I managed to evade his grip and made a dash for the door. I could see Lela and Allison running away in the distance, Brian leapt out the door to follow behind them. I couldn't blame them for leaving me. If at least one of us could get away, they could get help for whoever couldn't.

As the cool night air enveloped me, I began to think that maybe all four of us would get away. Then in my peripheral vision I saw the blonde woman, limping and with blood running down her face. With a truly terrifying grin, she lifted the rock that was in her hand. I didn't have time to react.

For the second time that night, I was out like a light.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I stumbled into consciousness, fighting the familiar feeling of tranquilizers. I was in what seemed like a hotel room this time. I could feel the scratchy synthetic comforter under my hands. That was about all I had time to notice before the blonde woman's scraped and bruised face appeared above mine.

"I don't think so," she whispered. I felt another sting in my arm. The last thought I had before my eyelids fluttered shut was that I was going to die.

WHEN I FINALLY CAME TO the next time, it was night again. Now if only I knew which night it was. My first thought was that I was absolutely freezing. I hung by my arms against what felt like a large tree. My winter coat was missing and the rough bark scraped against my back as I struggled to free myself. I looked down as best I could to see that my feet were about two feet from the ground.

The smell of smoke was thick in the air, scented with what smelled like cinnamon and anise. I crinkled my nose in distaste as the cloying scent stuck in my sinuses. I hate anise. As more of my conscious thought returned, I began to survey my surroundings. A large, cracked piece of stone was only a few feet away from where I hung. I had to swallow past a lump in my throat when I realized what it was . . . a gravestone.

Panicking, I began to struggle more against my restraints, which felt like they were made of metal. The graveyard was the last place I wanted to wake up. Well, the last place besides an actual grave. I mentally mapped out the Shelby graveyard, trying to place what area I was in. There were simply too many trees around though. The graveyard had trees, but they were spaced farther apart than the trees I was currently surrounded by.

I had to be somewhere in the woods. There were old abandoned houses in the woods. It would only make sense that those who lived there would have had a graveyard. A really old graveyard. This was very, very bad.

I worked against the bonds on my hands some more, but only succeeded in scraping and probably bloodying my wrists. My arms

and shoulders ached from supporting the weight of my body. I took a deep breath to try and scream.

I found I could scream, but was cut off quickly as someone suddenly appeared out of the darkness in front of me. It was the psychotic, gun-toting blonde. So, I was officially in the last place I wanted to be, staring down at the last person I wanted to see. Heck, I'd even take Nick over her.

"Hello again," she said cheerfully.

I glared down at her, not saying anything. She had a black eye and deep scratches running down one side of her face.

"Don't wanna talk huh?" she asked. She smiled a truly wicked smile. "That's okay," she went on. "You don't have to talk. All we need is your blood."

My blood? Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap. I swung my foot out in an attempt to kick her in her smug little face, but she easily dodged to the side and out of reach. She laughed a horrible jingling little laugh that I would remember forever (however long forever might be) and walked away.

I didn't have to wait alone for long. Nick came swaggering into sight to stand several feet away from me. His air of superiority was slightly tainted by his battered face, courtesy of Lela. Unfortunately his werewolf blood had already healed the bruises to an ugly yellow.

"Afraid to get too close?" I mocked.

"Not afraid," he countered. "Just smart."

"That's debatable," I mumbled.

"What the hell are you, anyway?" he asked. "I saw what you did to Claude and Michael."

Michael must have been crew-cut man's name. "I'll tell you what I am," I offered, "if you tell me what the heck you plan to do with me."

"We plan to slit your throat and steal your powers," he stated calmly.

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. I mean, I knew they were planning to kill me, but hearing it stated so coldly put ice in my veins. "Did you steal the others' powers? The ones you abducted?" I asked weakly.

"Yep," he answered cheerfully. "I mean, I was already a werewolf, but Jaime promised to give me more powers if I helped her get hers. She promised me *your* powers, and now that I've seen what you can do, I'm very glad that she did."

Okay, I thought, *keep him talking, buy more time.* "Jaime?" I asked. "Is that the blonde? How does she do it? Steal the powers I mean."

He traced the toe of his shoe in the dirt absentmindedly. "I don't know," he answered. "She lights the funny smelling fire and calls to . . . something. As far as I can tell, it's like a spirit or something. You'll

see. It appears in the fire. Then she slits our captive's throat. That would be you," he pointed a despicable finger at me. "Then she puts your blood into a big bowl and pours it into the fire for the spirit thingy. As far as I can tell, the spirit takes the powers from the blood, and gives them to her or to whoever she tells it to."

I was getting dizzy. I had to swallow back the bile that was climbing up my throat to ask, "If all you need is blood, can't you just take it from a non-lethal place. You can have my powers," I pleaded. "I don't want them."

"Nope," he said with a smile. "The spirit says that the captive has to die before it can take their powers. It has to separate them from your soul. Now that's enough explanation. Tell me what you are."

"I'm something you really don't want to mess with," I threatened.

He laughed at that. "Sorry honey. Threats don't really work when you're tied to a tree."

I forced myself to smile back at him, but it was more just a baring of teeth. "Remember when we met?" I asked. "And I told you I'd kill you if you betrayed me?"

He nodded. "Yep. It makes this situation all the more gratifying."

Ignoring his lack of fear I went on. "Well," I began, "I may not be able to kill you myself, but you'll still end up just as dead."

"And how's that?" he asked, still smiling.

"Because of what I am," I answered. "I'm a demon, which in and of itself might not deter you, but demons run together, and you *so* don't want demons after you."

"Get out of town," he said jovially. "A demon? Yours have to be like, the coolest powers ever."

"You are such an idiot," I mumbled, losing hope.

"We'll see about that," he remarked, then disappeared back into the darkness.

"We'll see about that," I mimicked to myself as he left. My wrists were throbbing from the restraints cutting into them. I had to get out of there. I closed my eyes and focused, trying to muster even a spark of fire to do . . . something. If I could blow up appliances, maybe I could melt the metal restraints. Or maybe set the tree branch I was hanging from on fire?

I tried to focus on how mad I should be at the whole situation, at Nick's casual talk about my death, but all I could feel was tired and scared.

I heard chanting behind me, from where I assumed the fire was. I was running out of time. What the heck kind of spirit steals powers only to give them back to a mortal anyhow? Was death what it wanted? That didn't really sound like a spirit. As far as I knew spirits didn't have, nor did they care about, that kind of power. No, this

particular deal sounded more like a demon. Not all demons are good ya know.

There was a loud whoosh, and I shuddered with the sudden electric sensation. The demon was here.

"Where is it?" I heard Nick's voice ask.

"I don't know," Jaime answered sharply. "Just shut up."

The demon wasn't here? But I had felt it . . .

"Maybe it ran away scared," another voice chimed in.

A surge of hope washed through me when I realized that it was my dad's voice. The whoosh had come from him! I smiled deliriously and tried to struggle against my restraints again. Then the screaming started.

Jaime screamed first, followed shortly by Nick. I watched in awe as glowing shadows decorated the forest in front of me from the flames. The screaming didn't last long. A few moments later, my dad came walking around my tree to stand before me.

"Hello Alexondra!" he said cheerfully. He stood at ease with his hands in the pockets of his slacks, no sign of stress on his face for having just killed two people.

"Hi dad," I answered, then cringed when I realized that I had called him dad. I'd been doing it in my head so much lately that it just came out.

He pretended not to notice my slip up as he set about examining the tree I was hanging from. Apparently seeing no other way, he hoisted himself up into the tree by some of the lower branches. I waited anxiously as his feet disappeared into the foliage.

"You ready?" He asked.

"Just do it," I grumbled.

With a loud snap, the branch I was hanging from broke off and I fell to the ground in a heap. My dad thrust the branch off to the side as he let it drop so it wouldn't land on me.

I stayed on the ground where I had landed, not quite ready to move. My dad's feet landed right beside my head, then he was hoisting me up with his hands beneath my shoulders. Now that I was down, he took a closer look at my cuffs. "Wait here," He ordered, then disappeared around the tree.

I stumbled after him, feeling like I somehow needed to see the carnage, if only to assure myself that it was really over. I expected a rather grisly scene, but it wasn't all that bad. Was the fact that I could think of two charred corpses as 'not all that bad' a bad sign?

Don't answer that.

My dad kicked the smaller of the blackened corpses, making parts of it disintegrate into ash. He walked a few steps away from the corpse, apparently spotting what he was looking for, then came up

with a purse in his hand. Jaime's purse. Luckily she hadn't been holding it when, well, you know.

He dug through it and came out with a set of keys. He tossed the purse into Jaime's fire as he walked back to me. He shuffled through the key ring and separated the handcuff key from the rest.

He stuck the key into my cuffs and they blissfully fell from my hands, one wrist, then the other.

"What took you so long?" I asked. "I thought you could *sense* me."

He furrowed his brow in annoyance. "I cannot *sense* you when you are underground or unconscious. Tonight was the first time you were awake long enough for me to get a mark on you."

I glanced down at Jaime's fire. "What happened to the other demon?"

My dad chuckled. "Turns out I know that particular demon. He is very skilled in illusions, and was making them believe that he gave them powers. It's a game that he plays."

"So what?" I asked. "He was having them kill people for no reason, so he could make Nick and the others think they were getting new powers?"

My dad nodded.

"But why?" I asked.

My dad shrugged. "Why not? He thinks it's fun. Convince people to kill supernaturals. Once he's had his fun he kills the people he originally made the deal with."

My jaw dropped in stunned understanding. I had almost died because of a . . . joke? "You're kidding. It's all for nothing? That is just . . . sick."

He grinned like the proverbial crocodile. "Not all demons are good, you know."

I shrugged off the fact that he had echoed my earlier thoughts exactly. He grabbed my left arm and draped it across his shoulder, and I let him, because my knees were going to give out any minute.

"You know, I still hate you," I said, needing to reassure myself of that fact.

"Yes Alexondra, I know," he answered, only the slightest mocking to his tone.

I looked down at Nick's corpse. "I told you so," I mumbled to it.

"What?" my dad asked.

"Nothing," I answered. "Will I be able to do that someday?" I asked, gesturing to the remains.

"Oh yes Alexondra. I have very high hopes for you," he answered.

Now *that* juicy little tidbit, was most definitely a bad thing. A very, very, *very* bad thing indeed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I found out that my dad could take me with him when he teleported, though he scoffed at the word teleportation. He called it simply *traveling*.

Whatever it was called, I was soon out of the forest. I assumed we would be going to my house, but in the blink of an eye, we were in the parking lot of Jason's apartment instead. My dad basically carried me up the stairs, though I pretended to walk as much as possible. Jason flung open his door before we could even knock.

He lifted my arm from my dad's shoulder and took me into a crushing hug. "I got here as soon as I could," he breathed into my hair. "I'm so sorry. I should have never left."

"No, you shouldn't have," I mumbled. I ignored the painful protest of my bruised ribs and let Jason continue crushing me.

I felt wetness against my cheek and realized he was crying. He drew me further into his apartment, leaving the door open for my dad to come in. Jason sat me down on his generic apartment couch, then sat close beside me.

I looked questioningly at my dad as he hovered awkwardly above us. He nodded toward Jason. "He made me promise to bring you straight here."

I rolled my head to the side to look at Jason. "He wouldn't let me come," he explained, sounding a bit petulant.

My dad sighed loudly. "I *also* told him that I can only carry one person when I travel, I needed to be able to carry Alexondra back."

"And I told him . . . " Jason began.

I cut him off with a hand in the air. I had a feeling that my dad was lying about only being able to carry one person, but I wasn't going to point it out. I forgot whatever I was about to say as I got my first good look at my wrists. They had partially healed already, but were still a sickening greenish brown, with ugly scabs decorating where the cuffs had worn away my skin.

At that moment Chase, Lucy, Allison, Max, Lela, and even Brian came bursting into Jason's apartment. At my startled expression, Jason explained, "I called them when your dad left to get you."

Lucy and Allison were the first to crush me with their hugs. "You

stink," Allison remarked as she slowly pulled away.

Her remark made me giggle. Then that giggle turned into full out, gut-churning laughter. My friends stared at me as if I had just recited the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and I laughed all the more. I was probably delirious with shock and exhaustion, and I didn't care in the least. We had once again come out of things alive.

My laughter ended just as abruptly as it started, as a truly horrifying thought dawned on me. "What did you guys tell my mom?"

No one answered me.

"Well?" I prompted.

"They *drugged* her," Brian answered.

My jaw dropped as I met Brian's serious brown eyes. I turned to Allison, seeing as she was the only other one who would meet my eyes. "You drugged my mom?" I asked skeptically.

Allison cringed. "Um, your dad did it."

I turned my attention to the demon in question. "Care to explain?"

"I didn't *drug* her," he responded, his voice betraying not the slightest drop of guilt. "I gave her something to make her sleep, and to make her memory a little . . . foggy."

"You drugged my mom!" I shouted.

My dad cocked his head and gave me a look that said I was being very silly. "What would you rather I had done?"

I was left once again with my mouth hanging open like an idiot. "I don't know, but you shouldn't have drugged her."

My dad just shrugged and began to casually explore Jason's apartment. I gave up on that particular argument and put my head in my hands. "What happened to the rest of our abductors?" I asked. I couldn't help flashing back to Claude's charred face. He'd seemed nice . . . for a kidnapper. The others could rot for all I cared.

"The red-haired woman will be dealt with," my dad answered. "The others have disappeared."

"Nick?" Lela asked sadly.

"Kindling," I answered.

She nodded and slumped down onto the couch next to me.

"Now, when you say she'll be *dealt with,*" I began, turning my attention back to my dad, "what exactly does that mean?"

"Do you really care?" Chase asked before my dad could answer.

I regarded him with a scowl. "Yes, I care." Turning to my dad again I added, "Just don't kill her okay?"

My dad nodded sharply. "Okay."

Now that that was settled, on to the next emergency . . . I seriously stunk. "Can we go home now?" I whined. "I'm in dire need of a shower."

Jason took my arm to help me stand. I was still feeling shaky, so I

let him. After days of blocking out how much I missed him, it felt good just to be near him again.

We silently left Jason's apartment, and I proceeded to wobble down the stairs to the parking lot. I managed to do it without much help from Jason, thanks to my death-grip on the railing. The only other vehicle I recognized in the lot was Chase's, and I wondered how everyone had gotten to Jason's together.

In answer to my question, Lela stepped up beside me. "Mind if I ride with you and Jason?" she asked. "The ride over in that excuse for a truck was none too comfortable."

"Sure," I mumbled as I shuffled over to the passenger's side of Jason's car. Jason unlocked the doors while the rest of my friends piled into Chase's truck. My dad came to stand beside me, preventing me from escaping to the safety of the car.

"You need to let me teach you Alexondra," he stated simply. Jason and Lela had already gotten inside the car, so I had no one to turn to for an interruption.

I glared up into my dad's expressionless face. I realized his nose was slightly sharper than mine, not as similar as the rest of our faces, and I took a brief moment to revel in that fact.

"You could try actually asking me," I said finally. "And it's Xoe."

I expected him to roll his eyes at me, but he met my gaze seriously. "Please let me teach you . . . Xoe."

I closed my eyes and breathed in the crisp night air. This would be the final step to letting him into my life. "Fine," I mumbled.

He smiled, and it was genuine. "I will see you soon then."

I opened the car door, then turned to stop him before he disappeared. "Hey," I began, "I have a question."

He raised an eyebrow at me in response.

"When they kidnapped me, they gave me a bunch of tranquilizers," I explained, "but I got over them really quickly, faster than Lela did."

My dad chuckled to himself before answering. "You have enough oomph to create fire from nothing. A fast metabolism is part of the package."

I couldn't help my smile at the term *oomph*. I liked it a lot better than "demon power." "Oomph huh?" I asked. "I guess I can deal with a little oomph," I conceded.

I slipped into the car just as my dad disappeared in a cloud of smoke. He apparently didn't care if anyone saw him. If only we all could be so secure.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When we got back to my house, Chase's truck was already parked out front. I wanted nothing more than to be alone with Jason, but my friends had been worried about me, and I could stand to spend a few minutes to reassure them that everything was really okay.

Jason, Lela, and I went into the house to find Max, Lucy, and Chase waiting in the living room. I went to stand near the couch with Jason following me like a shadow. No one said anything.

I stood awkwardly for a moment more. I was *way* too tired for this. "I'm, um, gonna go shower," I announced, pointing one finger half-heartedly toward the stairs. I hustled out of the living room and up to my room, Jason never more than two steps behind me the entire way.

Once we were alone, I fell into Jason's arms. I hadn't even checked to see if my mom was awake. I still had no idea what I was going to say to her. Sorry, but dad had to drug you? I somehow didn't think that would go over too well. Maybe I'd be able to convince her that she'd hit her head, and was now suffering from a minor case of harmless amnesia.

Jason sat down on the bed, and I curled awkwardly into his lap. My legs were a little too long for it, but at the moment I needed to be as close to him as I could. His dark brown sweater was slightly scratchy and I found myself briefly wondering why scratchy sweaters even existed. Who buys scratchy sweaters when there are soft ones out there? Jason apparently. Okay, I was obviously still a bit delirious. What had I come upstairs for again?

As if reading my mind, Jason asked softly, "Are you going to shower?"

"Oh, um, yeah," I mumbled in reply.

When I didn't move, he lifted me easily so he could stand, then set me gently back on the bed. He leaned down by my head and kissed the side of my forehead. "I will get Lucy to help you," he whispered.

"No," I mumbled, "get Allison." Lucy would fuss over me nervously. Allison would take things in stride, and wouldn't make me feel pathetic about needing help to be bathed. I wanted to do it myself, but now that I was safe, my body simply wouldn't move anymore.

Jason left while I was still sorting through my muddled thoughts, and before I knew it, Allison was doing her best to make me stand up so she could help me into the bathroom. I didn't really help much. In fact, I think I might have blacked out a little, because the next thing I knew, I was slumping down into a nice, hot bath. Ah, heaven.

Allison sat on the closed toilet. I was glad to have her there. It would really suck to have survived all of the danger, only to pass out and drown in the tub.

Allison leaned her head in her hands tiredly. She was dressed in a pale pink cardigan and faded jeans that made her look delicate and out of place next to my dark purple décor. "I shouldn't have left you Xoe," she said, tears choking her voice. "I'm so sorry."

I sunk a little deeper into the hot water. Allison had rolled up a towel for me to lean my head against and I got it wet with my movement. Not caring, I sunk down until the water was at my chin.

"I told you to leave, Al," I mumbled.

"But it was so we could get help," she argued. "By the time we got back to the crypt, you were gone. We left you all alone and it didn't help at all."

"You did the right thing," I breathed tiredly. "Just let it go."

Allison nodded to herself, then changed the subject. "Jason didn't get back to Shelby until just after Lela, Brian, and I escaped. He went crazy when he found out you'd been taken. It took Max, Chase, and your dad to hold him down and keep him from running off on his own to look for you."

When I didn't answer, she continued to fill me in. "And that was after it apparently took Max, Lucy, and your dad to get Chase to go back to the truck after they lost you at the coffee shop."

At that I raised a questioning eyebrow, but kept my eyes closed. "You know he's not going anywhere, now that the danger's over I mean?"

"Who?" I asked, not able to follow her train of thought.

"Chase," she answered. "He views your dad as family. Now he's got this weird protective thing with you."

"Surely you jest," I mumbled, and smiled to myself. Yeah, I was definitely delirious.

Allison took me seriously. "I just had to spend an entire 24 hours with him and your dad when we were looking for you. Trust me when I say that neither of them is going anywhere."

I opened my eyes a crack to regard her. Come to think of it, she did look more than a little tired. "You guys haven't slept?" I asked.

"Of course not!" she squealed, looking offended.

Okay, I hadn't realized I was making everyone wait when they hadn't slept at all the previous night. "Towel please," I asked.

I was feeling a little better, and managed to stand on my own while Allison held a towel open for me. I swaddled myself in its wonderful fluffy softness and stepped onto my purple rug, not caring that I was still dripping water from my legs. Allison pushed the little switch to drain my bathtub, then followed me into my bedroom. I sat on my bed while she pawed through my drawers. She threw me my dark green sweats and a long-sleeved black *Bauhaus* tee.

As soon as I was dressed, Allison helped me out of my room and back downstairs. We entered the living room to find Lucy, Lela, and Max all passed out. Lela and Lucy had taken the couches, so Max had simply taken a throw pillow and passed out on the floor. A wonderful smell was wafting out of the kitchen.

Allison walked over to lie on the floor by Max as I made my way to the kitchen. I found Jason and Chase leaning against the kitchen counter, each sipping on a mug of coffee. Seeing me, Jason went into the dining room and came back with a chair for me. I slumped into it gratefully then extended my hands for the mug of coffee Chase had poured for me.

"We threw in a couple of frozen pizzas," Jason informed me, "though I guess we're the only three eating now."

I nodded. "Is my mom still asleep?" I asked without looking up from my mug.

"Yes," Chase answered. "She should be out until morning."

I pouted, still not liking the idea of my mom being drugged, though I had to admit, it was rather convenient.

When the pizzas were done, the three of us sat in the dining room and ate in silence. As soon as we finished, Chase stood. "I can take Max home if you want," he offered.

I nodded, still not saying anything. I watched as Jason went to wake the wolf in question, but he was out cold, so Jason simply lifted him and carried him outside.

Chase looked down at me once we were alone. "I guess, to sound horribly cliché, this is goodbye."

I thought of what Allison had said about him, and I thought about the fact that Chase didn't have a family. "My mom and I always make a big dinner on Christmas eve. It's one of the few days out of the year that we actually cook. You should come."

Jason came back into the room before Chase could answer, so Chase simply smiled, then turned and walked out of the dining room. As soon as the door was shut, Jason sat down beside me again.

"You invited him to Christmas Eve dinner?" he asked.

I crossed my arms and lowered my head to the table. "We needed another demon to round out the group," I mumbled.

"Am I supposed to know what that means?" Jason asked with a

hint of laughter in his voice.

I shook my head, keeping my face buried in my arms and laughed despite my exhaustion. “It means it’s bedtime,” I answered.

A moment later, Jason hoisted me up in his arms and proceeded to carry me upstairs. I left Lucy, Allison, and Lela where they were. If they got cold, Lucy and Allison knew where the spare blankets were. Jason carried me into my room and placed me on bed.

I waited while he shut my bedroom door, then I felt him snuggle up beside me. We had a brief struggle of trying to put the comforter over us without actually getting off the bed. Then we settled in for me to sleep.

Ah, heaven.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I woke up at 6:00am, uncharacteristically early for me, especially given how exhausted I had been. I looked groggily around my room for Jason, only to realize that he wasn't there. I slipped out of bed and padded barefoot into my bathroom. There was an unpleasant looking ring around my tub from my bath the night before. I grabbed the foaming bathroom cleaner that I kept under my pedestal sink on the floor and gave the bathtub a good spray down and left it at that.

I gathered my hair into a ponytail, washed my face and brushed my teeth, then went in search of my mom. I found her milling around in her room, looking dazed and disoriented. She didn't even notice me watching her from the doorway.

"Just wake up?" I asked her.

She practically jumped out of her skin at my voice. She whipped around and saw that it was only me, and put her hand to her heart in relief. "You scared me to death honey," she breathed, then scrunched up her face in confusion.

"Are you feeling . . . okay?" I asked hesitantly.

She nodded and slumped down to sit on her bed. "It's the weirdest thing," she explained. "I can't remember yesterday at all, or the night before really. The last thing I remember was having cookies and cinnamon rolls with you and your friends."

Thanks a lot, dad. "Um, did you hit your head or something?" I asked.

She cocked her head while she tried to come up with an answer. "I don't remember hitting it, but then again, if that's what made me lose my memory, I probably wouldn't remember it. I *do* have a killer headache."

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" I asked, keeping my fingers crossed that the answer would be no. There was no telling what they might find.

She shook her head, then answered, "I think I'm okay. I mean, besides the headache, my head isn't actually sore anywhere. If I had hit it hard enough to do any real damage, I'm sure there'd be a lump."

"Yeah," I agreed, "I'm sure you're fine." If she had actually hit her head, I would have insisted she go to the hospital, but, well, you

know. Before my mom could think too much about things, I changed the subject. “Happy Christmas Eve?” I said as if it was a question.

My mom smacked her palm to her forehead. “I completely forgot! Happy Christmas Eve, Xoe. We better get cooking.”

I sighed sarcastically. “If we must.”

We always cooked Christmas Eve dinner in our pajamas, then showered and changed clothes before whoever we invited arrived. I raised my eyebrows at my mom’s purple polo and jeans. “You’re not in your pj’s,” I remarked.

She looked down as if just realizing her attire. “Oh!” she gasped. “I must have really been out of it last night.”

I raised my eyebrow even farther and tapped my foot in mock impatience.

My mom rolled her eyes at me. “You start the coffee. I’ll get changed.”

I nodded and left my mom’s room. I heard someone knocking as I began to descend the stairs, so I hurried the rest of the way, and even leapt over the last three stairs. I was feeling good-as-new. Let’s hear it for being a demon!

I reached the door and looked out the peephole (I knew better than to just answer it anymore). Jason was waiting outside with a little cardboard carrying thing containing three coffees and a bag that I sincerely hoped contained Danishes.

I opened the door and took in our breakfast delivery man. He was dressed in a horrible Christmas sweater complete with snowmen and little laughing elves and a crisp new pair of jeans.

“I’ll take the coffee,” I began, “but I don’t think I can allow that sweater in my house.”

“Have a little Christmas spirit,” he jested. “I come bearing Danishes.”

“Well in that case,” I swung the door open dramatically, “welcome to my humble abode.”

He gave me a good-natured smirk. “You are too kind.”

We both turned to see my mom coming down the stairs in full-blown footie pajamas done in blue and covered in snowflakes. It was a very sad day when I was the best dressed in green sweats and my old, ratty *Bauhaus* t-shirt.

“You better turn around now Jason,” my mom called after she spotted us. “The day when Xoe and I cook is a very, scary, day.”

“Don’t scare him mom!” I shouted back. “He comes bearing sustenance!”

My mom came to stand before Jason. “In that case welcome, how are you at prepping turkeys?”

Jason sighed in resignation and handed me the coffee and

Danishes. He slid one of the coffees out of the holder and disappeared into the kitchen. I smiled to myself, glad that he was there.

"Is Allison coming?" my mom asked as soon as we were alone.

Lucy's family required her to be home on Christmas Eve, but Allison always came to our dinners. "Yep," I answered. "Oh, and Chase."

My mom nodded. "What about Brian? I know you two aren't too close anymore."

Speaking of Brian, I still had that Christmas gift for him. He'd gone home after our reunion at Jason's apartment. I had to assume that he was even less inclined to talk to me now than ever.

"I'll tell you in a minute," I answered, then turned to run back upstairs.

I went into my room to dig Brian's jersey out of my closet. I hadn't had a chance to wrap anything, but since he probably didn't want a gift from me to begin with, I doubted he'd care whether or not it was wrapped.

I trotted back downstairs with the jersey in hand, stopping to slip on some winter boots before heading out the front door. I looked down at the jersey as I trotted toward Brian's house, then skidded to a halt, almost running into Brian as he jogged toward me.

We stared at each other a moment, then I held out the jersey. He took the jersey with one hand and stuck the other one into his pocket. When his hand came back out something shiny came with it. He held out a dainty silver bracelet with a heart charm attached to the clasp. Upon closer examination I noticed that the charm had my name engraved on it.

I hesitantly took the bracelet from his outstretched hand. "Since when do you get me jewelry?" I asked with a smile.

Brian looked down at the ground as he answered. "Since everything changed."

My smile wilted around the edges. I wasn't sure where he was going with this. I waited in silence for him to elaborate.

"I'm going to try harder to be your friend, Xoe," he said finally meeting my eyes. "I abandoned you because I couldn't handle the . . . changes in your life, when I should have been there to help you handle them."

A glimmer of hope surfaced in my mind. Too bad I had to squash it. "Being my friend puts you in danger, Brian. You have to think carefully about this choice. I'll understand if you say we can't be friends. I just need closure one way or the other."

Brian's brow furrowed into angry lines. "We're friends, Xoe. End of story. I may not be able to handle everything all at once, but we're both going to work on this friendship if it kills us."

"It very well may," I mumbled.

Brian sighed. "Shut up and invite me inside."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you sure? You risk great peril."

Brian grinned. "I've eaten your cooking before Xoe."

I playfully punched Brian in the arm, then turned to walk back up my driveway. As we reached my door, I noticed a small burgundy box with an understated gold bow tied around it. Brian stooped to pick it up. He turned it over in his palm, then handed it to me with a shrug. "No name on it."

I took the offered box and walked to sit down on my front porch swing. "Go on inside," I told Brian. "Make sure my mom doesn't burn down the house.

Brian gave me a final considering look, then let himself into my house. I stared at the box for several minutes before finally untying the delicate gold bow. I removed the lid to reveal a somewhat gaudy ring and a folded piece of stationary. I slipped the ring onto my index finger then unfolded the note. It read simply:

This ring is a family heirloom. Its origins are unknown, as are its magical properties. Have a merry Christmas, and give Libby my best.

-A

WELL, the A had to stand for Alexondre. I placed the note back inside the box and examined the ring more closely. It was composed of a brownish red gemstone the size of my thumbnail set in delicate, spiraling silver vines that twisted to form the band of the ring. As I watched, a flare of light emanated from the center of the stone. I blinked my eyes in astonishment then looked at the stone again. As far as I could tell it was an ordinary stone once more. I'd have to ask my dad about it at our first official lesson. I gathered up the box and ribbon and headed into the warmth of my house.

Over the next few hours I helped my mom bake and mash and baste while Jason and Brian tried to be cordial over a game of chess. By the time Max and Allison showed up, my mom and I had both showered, and the boys had managed to set the table with mismatched plates and silverware.

I was beginning to think that Chase would be a no-show when the doorbell rang. I answered to find him standing in a deep red button up shirt and what looked like new, charcoal gray slacks.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You know this is a casual event, right?"

Chase shrugged. "I've never been to a Christmas Eve dinner before."

My jaw dropped. "*Never*?"

Chase shrugged again, seeming embarrassed. I tried to usher him inside as a change of subject, but instead he grabbed my hand and led me out onto the porch, closing the door behind us.

"I wasn't sure if I should get you anything . . . " he began as he fished around in his pocket to pull out a small gray box. He handed me the box, then watch expectantly for me to open it.

I cracked the lid to find a charm in the shape of a curling serpent, with tiny green gems for eyes. "Gee," I began, "I go my whole life without anyone buying me jewelry, then I get it all in one day."

"If you don't like it . . . " Chase began.

"Oh no," I cut him off. "It's perfect." I held up my wrist with Brian's bracelet, and twisted the loop of the charm onto the clasp with the heart on it.

Chase smiled and met my eyes and the moment suddenly became way too intimate. I blushed and grabbed his arm to usher him inside. As we came through the front door we ran into Jason, apparently coming to check on me. Chase relinquished my arm and the three of us walked awkwardly to join everyone else at the table.

The dinner was interesting, to say the least. The mashed potatoes closely resembled soup, and the candied yams probably weren't supposed to be tinged with gray, but at least the turkey came out perfectly. That was probably because Jason cooked it, but no one needed to know that little fact.

We all served ourselves, and much to my chagrin everyone avoided the yams. Out of spite I stood and grabbed the bowl, then proceeded to pile a heaping spoonful onto everyone's plates. Lucy was the first trooper to place a dainty bite into her mouth. We all waited while she started to chew, then laughed as she ran into the kitchen to spit the bite back out.

All seemed well again in the Meyer's household. We finished dinner and watched old clay-mation Christmas movies together. By midnight everyone had passed out except for Jason and me. Allison and Max fell asleep holding hands. Who saw that one coming?

Jason and I crept upstairs to my room where we snuggled up with my comforter wrapped around us. I reached over the end of the bed and pulled out the books I got Jason. I hadn't got around to wrapping them, but figured Jason wouldn't really mind. He accepted the books with what I hoped wasn't fake enthusiasm.

He stood up and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. "I'll be right back, your gift is in my car."

With a blur of motion he hopped out of my window. I was left to wait alone on my bed and reflect. When the year had started I'd led a normal life. Now I had a boyfriend, a dad, a werewolf pack, and

Chase. I wasn't too keen on investigating what I meant to Chase. Ignore it and it would go away? Doubtful, very doubtful. The more disturbing question was whether I really wanted him to go away. It was kind of nice having another demon around.

Jason interrupted my thoughts as he popped back into my room through my window. He handed me a rectangular box wrapped in bright, reindeer covered wrapping paper with a big red bow on it.

"Tell me it's not jewelry," I said sarcastically.

Not understanding my humor, Jason cocked his head in confusion.

I shook my head. "Nevermind."

I tore open the wrapping paper and let it fall to the floor to reveal a box with a pretty laptop computer on it. I shook the box by my ear. "Is it . . . shoes?"

"No," Jason laughed.

"A puppy?" I questioned.

Jason grinned and took the box from me so he could open it and pull the computer out of it. He set it on my lap for me to examine. I looked up at my ancient hand-me-down desktop computer, then back at my laptop. I smiled. "I knew I should have bought you something better than books."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next day was the least eventful day I'd had all week. Abel had shown up personally to apologize for not reaching Shelby in time to help. He wished me a merry Christmas, then left with a knowing smile and a 'see you soon.'

School would start up again in a few weeks, along with my how to be a demon lessons. Even more daunting was the looming Werewolf Coalition meeting. I still didn't know how I was going to convince my mom to let me go.

All of those worries were for another day. Just for Christmas, I ignored all of my problems. I went sledding and watched more Christmas movies with my mom and Jason. I was somehow happy with my new strange life, and that was worrisome enough.

Broken Beasts

Book Three

CHAPTER ONE

Standing in line at the airport. So this was what it had all come down to. Jason was standing to my left, and Chase to my right. They are polar opposites except for their height. At 6'2" Jason is slightly taller than Chase's 6', but the similarities end there. Where Jason has brown hair, blue eyes, and lighter skin, Chase has black hair, dark gray eyes, and darker skin. I'm a pasty ghost compared to either of them with my blonde hair, green eyes, and white-as-a-sheet complexion.

Jason and Chase had become like my own personal bodyguards since the abduction incident . . . extremely annoying, but fairly cute bodyguards. I could hear Chase softly humming. I'd had about enough of his damn humming. It was never something normal. Today it sounded like the *Harry Potter* theme.

Just about a month ago, some wannabee supernaturals had kidnapped me with the intention of stealing my powers. When I say wannabee, I mean that they wanted to be like other supernaturals, so they were killing them in an attempt to steal their powers. I'm a half-demon by the way, so is the boy to my right, well, he's a little more than half. The other boy is a vampire. And let's not forget the werewolves standing in line behind us. They were the reason I was at the Portland, Oregon airport preparing to fly down South to Moab, Utah.

See, amongst the chaos of kidnappings, new "friends", and the reappearance of my long-lost father, I'd managed to become the leader, or "alpha" of a misfit werewolf pack.

Now we were all on our way to meet with the Werewolf Coalition. That's right, the werewolves actually have a governing body, a place for every wolf, and every wolf in their place. If we wanted to have our place, we had to prove ourselves. I'd been trying to not think too hard on what proving ourselves might entail.

I held Jason and Chase's tickets as well as my own. When we reached the front of the line, the female security guard took the tickets with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. I gave her a dirty look and shoved Chase forward to walk first through the metal detector.

"Thanks Darling," Chase jested, his slight accent that I was yet to

place coloring his words. I guess I could just ask him what it was, but Chase didn't like to talk about his past.

Jason chuckled and walked through next. The security guard could speculate all she wanted, she *so* did not know the most interesting things about us.

Jason hadn't quite managed a friendship with Chase over the past month, but he at least tolerates him now. They seem to have some sort of understanding between them. Chase looks out for me because my dad asked him to, and Jason because he's my boyfriend. If they were logical, they'd understand that they both have the same end goal and go from there, but when are boys really logical?

We turned and waited for Lucy and Max to walk through the detectors. Lela and Allison had gone to Utah a few days ahead of us to fill out paperwork and get our rooms at one of the local inns situated.

Question: Why did we need Allison there when she had nothing to do with werewolf affairs?

Answer: We didn't.

We had all agreed that it would be best if she didn't come. She's human, and there was no need for her to put herself in danger. Despite our decision, Allison had caught up with Lela, telling her that she was supposed to go with her. We'd found out because Lela had called to check in and had mentioned Allison.

Now Lela, for some reason, holds the firm belief that I plan on beating her up when I get to Utah. I have no intention of doing so . . . probably. I was annoyed, but one does not simply get into fistfights with werewolves over a little annoyance.

My cell phone rang as we were waiting for the security lady to search Max's bags. I still have an old crappy flip phone. No fancy phones for this girl. I suppose it would be convenient to have one, but when you accidentally set things on fire a lot, carrying around expensive electronics becomes impractical.

I checked the screen to see that it was my mom . . . again. She had grudgingly let me go to Utah, as long as I promised I wouldn't get behind in school. She's still trying to cope with finding out that her only child is part demon. She has accepted it somewhat. She had known for years that my dad was something . . . other, but she didn't know he was a demon until I'd found out myself and told her.

It had actually been Chase that talked her into letting me go, with the promise that he would look after me. She loves Chase, don't ask me why. She knows he's a demon, just like she knows what the rest of us are, but for some reason it doesn't seem to bother her. I silenced the phone and shoved it back into my pocket.

As soon as Max had put his shoes back on, we headed for our gate. Lucy was the only one of our group that minded flying, as far as I

knew. I'm pretty sure that her fear springs from her obsessive need to be in control of everything. I glanced at her petite figure as she tensely walked like there was something shoved in a place I won't mention, and decided to keep my theory to myself.

We sat to wait for boarding and I instantly pulled out my copy of Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. Feeling the worn pages in my grasp was an instant comfort. I'm one of those weirdos that will reread a book multiple times. I find it's like watching a favorite movie, you learn the words so well that you can open the book and pick up anywhere in the story and still enjoy it.

It would have probably been smart to discuss the matters at hand with the group. We were, after all, heading towards a gathering of werewolves. We also weren't really sure what would be expected of us. A more in-depth game plan would have been nice, but I was fine with just reading instead.

We'd discussed our own opinions on how we should handle this little trip to the point of redundancy, and I didn't plan on giving anyone the opportunity to discuss it with me further. I just wanted to get it over with.

We didn't have to wait long. The slow process of boarding began. Apparently we'd made it just in time. If we had been much later we might have missed our flight. That would be terrible. That was sarcasm there, if you didn't catch it.

I haven't flown much, but I've been told that it's best to get to the airport at least an hour before your flight. That had been my plan, but try telling that to a frantic new werewolf about to meet a whole slew of her own kind.

Lucy had never really cared much about her style, but apparently the situation made clothing a lot more important in her mind. Add in her extremely over-protective mother and her extremely talkative little sister, and well . . . we didn't have to wait long at the airport.

I managed to keep my nose in my book the entire time we waited in the slowly shuffling line that led us onto the aircraft. As soon as we were on the plane, I quickly snagged the only window seat in our block of tickets.

The plane had three seats on each side of the aisle. Lucy and Max slid into the two seats beside me, leaving Chase and Jason to share a row with a rather large man already sitting in the window seat.

I cringed at the smell of recycled airplane air, then buckled my seat belt and raised my book back up in front of my face. I glanced over at Lucy, but she didn't see me. Her eyes were shut tight in concentration, probably counting to ten over and over again in her head.

She didn't even notice as a young girl in a school uniform tried to

shove her suitcase in the overhead compartment for our group of seats. The girl couldn't quite reach, and nearly dropped the suitcase on Lucy's head before an adult finally helped her out.

The steward gave us the whole safety spiel, and I finally started getting a little nervous. What if someone on the plane made me mad and I started a fire? If it could happen with TVs and washing machines, what was to stop me from getting angry and exploding one of the plane's engines? Maybe I should just try to sleep the whole flight.

I glanced over at Jason, who gave me a smile and a thumbs up. Chase had already managed to procure a pillow and blanket from the stewardess. I was pretty sure they didn't usually hand those things out until after takeoff. I gave him a considering look, and he mimicked Jason's thumbs up with two of his own. I turned back around as the plane started moving forward on the runway. A deep breath and away we went.

CHAPTER TWO

The flight was thankfully uneventful. When we arrived, Lela was waiting at the small airport for us with a very large, black SUV. The back had two rows of seats so we could all fit in one trip. Lela refused to make any eye contact with me while we loaded our luggage into the back of the SUV. I felt a twinge of satisfaction at having a tall, exotic knock-out afraid of me. Petty, who me?

We were able to slide all of our luggage into the trunk space without having to stack anything. This was a nod to the amount of trunk space, and not to our minimal luggage, because it wasn't minimal at all. We had packed for all contingencies, not knowing what type of clothing would be appropriate for meeting the other wolves.

“Okay,” I announced, “Who wants the front seat?”

“You have to take it,” Lela interjected, finally flipping her long dark hair out of her face. “You’re Alpha. You can’t sit in the back.”

Oh, more werewolf etiquette; joy. Feeling crankier than ever, I asked, “What happens if you have more than two Alphas in the same car.”

Lela opened the front door and looked at me meaningfully. “They fight.”

“Who's going to know if I ride in the back?” I pushed.

Lela gave me a very serious look. “They'll know. They always do.”

I got in without another word. This was so not my idea of a vacation. Everyone else piled in, much more somber than before. Lela got in the driver's seat and started the engine. We pulled out of the lot and onto a narrow highway.

Though there are still tall trees in Moab, its color scheme was something completely foreign to me, having grown up in Oregon. Cliff faces formed out of porous rock in shades of red, orange, and brown decorated the landscape at random intervals.

From what I could see the trees were mostly oak, but we had oak in Oregon too, only our oaks were surrounded by plenty of pine trees. The landscape was so visually stunning, that I managed to turn my thoughts to absorbing the scenery the entire drive to our destination. With the amount of pending thoughts to process, it was quite a feat.

Our hotel was a quaint little inn with red paint to match the orange and red rock surroundings. We got out of the SUV and walked onto the asphalt. The perfectly manicured lawn hosted a slew of people waiting in front of a table to get what looked like ID badges.

Noticing my interest, Lela dug in her large leather purse and produced a handful of lanyards with our names on them.

“One of the reasons I got here early,” she explained. “We’re all signed in and ready to go. Plus, the latecomers had to get rooms at a different hotel after the inn filled up. This way we won’t have to drive to get to any of the meetings.”

“The meetings are all at the inn?” Lucy asked walking up behind us, quickly taking everyone’s lanyards from Lela. That's our Lucy, always straight to business.

“No,” Lela answered, forming a smirk with her full lips. She gestured her hand in a sweeping motion to the wooded area behind the inn, “they’re held out there.”

Well that wasn't ominous at all. I felt hands on my shoulders and leaned back against Jason’s chest. He has a way of always knowing when I’m stressed. Jason moved to put one arm around my shoulders, and guided me in the direction of the inn. I'm tall for a girl, but Jason is tall for a guy, so he can comfortably put his arm over my shoulders.

My feet didn’t seem to want to move. I had one lovely moment of keeping my tattered gray sneakers glued to the ground, then I had no choice but to walk into the wolf den, with my pack of wolves behind me.

Before we could reach the door of the inn, one of the last people I wanted to see came walking up. Abel is tall, dark, and handsome; either Hispanic or more likely American Indian, though he has no accent that I can decipher either way. Today his long dark hair was pulled back into a tight braid that trailed over his shoulder. I felt the sudden urge to yank that braid out of his skull, or maybe set it on fire. I resisted the urge . . . barely.

Abel hadn’t actually done anything wrong as far as me and mine were concerned, but I couldn’t help blaming him for this debacle anyway. He's the leader of the Western sector of the Werewolf Coalition, and this whole mess had begun because the lot of them hadn't put down a very crazy werewolf.

Said crazy werewolf had scratched my best friend, turning her into a werewolf, and the downward spiral went on from there. So yeah, Abel didn't *really* do anything wrong, but he didn't do anything right either, and a girl’s gotta have an outlet for her anger.

Abel came to stand in front of us. Jason stepped back to give me room. Abel came eye to eye with Jason’s tall frame. I was left to stare at the silver buttons on his rather tight fitting black vest. There was no

shirt underneath.

Lela stood directly behind me. Her attempt at hiding would have been more effective if she weren't an inch or two taller than me. A fleeting thought brushed through my mind that Lucy and Max must feel like they're hanging out with a bunch of giants all the time.

Abel spoke, interrupting my thoughts. "So glad that you are here Alexondra. I've promised your father that I will do my best to return you to him in your current state."

The double meaning wasn't lost on me. My current state wasn't the best, considering what a mess my life was. Still, I took Abel at his word. My dad's a demon. Breaking a promise to him would probably be bad. I still didn't feel any safer though.

"It's Xoe," I grumbled in response. "And let's hope you're good at keeping your promises."

He smiled. "I assure you I am. I trust your flight went well."

"Sure," I replied tartly. "Don't you have other guests to greet?"

Ok normally I'm not *that* rude, but I was in defense mode. I was in a new place that I didn't want to be in, and I was soon to be surrounded by new people I didn't want to be surrounded by. My go-to defense was grumpy. Anyone that got in my way would be showered by a torrential downpour of grumpy.

Abel chuckled. "This should be interesting."

With that cryptic observation, Abel turned away and moseyed towards the lanyard supply table. His black jeans fit as tightly as his vest. Men should simply not wear pants that tight. His black boots blended into his jeans so that at a distance you couldn't tell where one started and where the other ended.

"You're staring," Chase whispered in my ear.

Crap, it probably seemed like I'd been staring at Abel's butt. I guess I had. Not in admiration mind you. I made a mental note to always keep my eyes on the ground when I'm lost in thought, and headed towards the inn door, trying to hide my blush.

Chase chuckled and walked ahead to hold the door for me. He gave me a little salute as I walked through the doorway. Had I mentioned that this was going to be a long trip? Well, what I meant was that this was going to be a very, very, very, long trip.

By the time we pushed through the crowd in the lobby and got to our rooms it was already 5:00pm. We had two rooms, one with two beds and a cot, and the other with just two beds. Lucy and Allison were going to share a bed in the smaller room. My options were to share with Lela in the girls' room, or share with Jason in the boys' room. I ended up in the boys' room.

After examining the rustic room, complete with Terracotta pots and paintings of desert scenes with horses, I sprawled across the

Southwestern themed comforter of Jason's and my rather small bed. Chase sat down on the cot with a sour expression on his face. He had lost to Max at rock, paper, scissors. The two of them didn't want to sleep in the same bed. Yet another example of boys being silly.

Chase bounced back and forth a bit on his cot, distaste showing plainly in his dark gray eyes. His near-black hair was starting to look a little shaggy, as opposed to that elegantly tousled look that some boys manage. He didn't really seem to care either way.

I twined my fingers through the ends of my own shaggy hair in thought. I still hadn't managed to find the time to get it cut. My demon lessons with my dad took up way more of my time than I liked. I was actually looking forward to a little vacation from him.

Going from not knowing my dad, to seeing him multiple times a week was overwhelming to say the least. I'd blamed him at first for not being in my life, but then I'd been enlightened of the fact that my mom had done her best to keep me away from him. I'd gotten over the hurt . . . mostly. He was definitely trying to make up for it now, in a really annoying way.

It wasn't all bad though. The lessons had definitely paid off. I was now able to manifest a small flame in my palm and could burn things on command, rather than on accident. It was peanuts compared to what my dad could do, but I'm just happy to finally have a measure of control. I don't randomly explode appliances anymore, but I for some reason can't do it voluntarily now either.

I looked down at the ring my dad had given me for Christmas, a family heirloom apparently. We didn't know what it did, if anything, but I've caught occasional flashes of light from the deep red stone. Sometimes even the silver vines that make up the band seemed to move, but whenever I tried to show anyone they stopped. The ring gave me the serious heebie-jeebies to tell the truth, but my dad insisted that I wear it. I'd given up on asking why.

Whenever my sense of teenage rebellion would flare up I'd take it off, but I always put it back on after a few hours. It would be seriously stupid if something bad happened, just because I didn't want to wear a ring. Of course, wouldn't it be even more stupid if something bad happened because I wore a ring out of fear of something bad happening? Don't answer that. For now, I'd wear the ring.

A quick knock on the adjoining door preceded Allison's entrance. I was still cranky with her for weaseling her way along on our trip. I was responsible for enough people already. I didn't need to be watching out for her too.

Allison's long, honey blonde hair was tied back in a tight ponytail, leaving her face completely unframed. It was a new look for her, and made her pale brown eyes look big and innocent. The smile she gave

me was definitely not innocent. She was enjoying the fact that she had pulled one over on us. Bitter much?

She sat beside me in her designer jeans and charcoal v-neck sweater, snapping the strap of my black spaghetti strap shirt on her way down.

“Aren’t you freezing?” she asked, eyebrow raised.

“I’m always hot these days,” I groaned in reply. “I feel like a human space heater.”

Allison placed a hand against the side of my neck. Her palm felt cold and dry.

“You don't feel *that* warm. I mean yeah, you kind of feel like a human heating pad, but not uncomfortably so,” she stated in a skeptical manner.

I glared at her. “Yes, I'm pleasantly warm to someone who's cold, but try feeling like you're standing in the sun twenty-four seven.”

“Hey I've been wondering,” Max piped in loudly from his perch on his bed, “we already know that you can't get burned by fires or hot surfaces, but can you get sunburned?”

The fact that I couldn't get burned by hot surfaces was a fairly recent discovery. The novelty had somewhat worn off. At first I'd amused myself by taking hot pans out of the oven without gloves and putting my hand in the fireplace, but it seemed to upset my mom, so I stopped. Well I stopped doing it while she was looking.

I hadn't yet considered the idea of the sun not being able to burn me. “I haven’t managed it yet,” I replied sullenly. “Considering the fact that before my powers came into action I would burn in about ten minutes, I'd say I probably don't need sunblock anymore.”

I was feeling less and less human every day. Maybe I'd still wear the sunblock just to make myself feel better.

Max opened his mouth to say something else, but before he could, Allison stood abruptly and marched back into her room. She shut the door firmly behind her, as if she couldn't stomach another word from him.

I turned to give Max a suspicious look. “What did you do to make her mad?”

Max shrugged in reply. “I turned her down.”

“Like for a date?” Chase interjected skeptically.

Max is 5’4” with sandy blond hair, pale green eyes, and freckles. I will forever think of him as a little elf. Allison on the other hand is 5’9”, blonde, and curvy.

“Not for a date,” Max said with more than a hint of venom, “though we have been on a few of *those*. She asked me to make her a wolf. I told her she was being an idiot and she got offended.”

“What!” I exclaimed, jumping up from the bed. Oh, this was *so* not

happening. I'd worked very hard to keep my last human friend out of the freak-show.

Max shrugged, as if it weren't a big deal. "She's tired of being the only human, but she doesn't understand what she's asking. I tried to explain it to her, but she wouldn't listen."

Oh, she was *tired* of being the only human, so why not just become a werewolf? I'd tell her why not. Maybe she wouldn't listen to Max, but I'd *make* her listen to me.

I turned from Max and marched straight into the girls' room without a knock. Allison was *lucky* to be the only human. I found her standing by the window talking to Jason. I brushed past him and shoved Allison down onto the nearest bed.

I jumped on top of her and pinned her down, my demon-fueled strength quickly putting an end to her struggles. I'm as strong as a werewolf when I'm angry, unfortunately I only have human strength when I'm not.

Werewolves have their strength all of the time. Being a werewolf changes the entire composition of someone's body. It's a magic of a sort, but more chemical. My strength was fueled by pure magic alone, and since I don't have much control of my magic, I don't have much control of my strength.

"Why are you here?" I demanded.

She looked to Jason for help, but he just raised his hands in surrender and backed away. I've always said he is a very smart man.

Allison turned her attention back to me with a defiant look in her eyes. I vaguely noticed that our entire party had filtered into the room, and everyone was huddled as far back from us as possible. Everyone, except for Chase that was. He's the only one I can't burn, something about a demon aura. Not that I hadn't tried a time or two. He can be rather infuriating when he wants to be. I could still set the room around Chase on fire, but I'd try to restrain myself.

I should have been exercising more caution around Allison. As the only human, if I burned her, she'd heal human slow. Everyone else in the room could take a beating . . . erm, burning. Allison couldn't. That thought alone helped me calm my anger a bit.

I focused all of my attention back on the human in question. "Why?" I demanded again.

"I don't want to be human anymore," she mumbled quickly. "Max and Jason both refused to help me."

I whipped my gaze up to regard Jason. "You knew?" I asked, shocked.

"I've been trying to talk her out of it," he replied, voice steady.

His aura of calm was given away by the fact that he couldn't seem to stop running his hands through his dark brown hair. It was his most

obvious nervous tell. You'd think after all of the years he'd been alive he would have grown out of it, but old habits die hard.

I regarded the rest of the room, Allison nearly forgotten underneath me. “Who else knew?”

After a moment of silence, Lela raised her hand, but refused to lift her gaze from the floor. So she had asked everyone in our group except Chase, Lucy, and me . . . the only ones she knew couldn’t, or wouldn’t help her.

Being a demon is hereditary. It can't be passed on like lycanthropy. It's more difficult to make someone a vampire, they often die in the process, but it can be done. The fact that she'd asked Jason to turn her meant that she was desperate. Desperate and stupid.

I slowly crawled off of the bed and marched out into the hallway, instead of back into the other room. I shut the door behind me to signify that no one should follow me, then made my way downstairs and back outside. I'd been losing my temper like this a lot lately. Everyone knew to let me cool off. People ended up with blisters otherwise.

The lawn was still crowded with werewolves. I *so* did not want to see werewolves. I might set one of them on fire. Instead of walking through them, I made a quick left and headed straight out into the woods, not really knowing where I was going. I needed time to think.

After a good ten minutes of walking mindlessly, I finally began to take in my surroundings. The trees in this area were completely alien compared to those in Shelby. Everything in Moab was drier, and . . . spikier.

I had noticed that the river near the hotel supported towering cottonwood trees, but once you ventured away from the moisture it all became short, spine-covered mesquites and other unforgiving plant life.

The mountains in the near distance were populated with the same oaks I had noticed on our drive. Maybe I’d still see pines later tonight at the werewolf “meet and greet,” which would take place in said mountains. Why on earth would Allison want to be part of this?

I mean, I know on the outside having powers and extra strength and speed seems cool . . . okay it’s definitely kind of cool, but the drawbacks aren’t worth it. Since I'd found out I was a demon, I had been kidnapped and beaten. I’d been lied to and used. I’d hurt people. I'd *killed* people. My life was in constant disarray. My mom is afraid to even ask about my life anymore.

There will always be people wanting to use me, or hurt me. Whoever first said that power corrupts was right, though they probably didn’t mean it in the sense that I’m using it. Power corrupts your life when you have it and other people want it.

Allison knew everything that Lucy and I had gone through since our lives were changed by paranormal means. She'd been there to see it all. Heck, she'd even gotten beaten and kidnapped herself, just for being near us. Voluntarily becoming a part of that world was just plain stupid. I couldn’t let her do it. If she was too stupid to protect herself from our fate, then I'd do it for her. She wasn't becoming a werewolf. I’d have to see to that tonight.

CHAPTER THREE

Payback is a bitch. I was beginning to realize that werewolves don't like it when non-werewolves kill them. No matter that the werewolf I'd killed was psychotic and trying to kill me. I was even getting blamed for Nick's death, which was actually my dad's doing. Nick had also been trying to kill me.

As soon as I reached the Inn's lawn after my little reflective walk, an older woman, presumably a werewolf walked up and tried to spit on me. She missed, but I didn't. She hadn't taken into account that my powers were fueled by anger. I managed to knock her out with a single punch. Respect for my elders be damned. I stepped right over her prostrate form without another glance and kept walking.

Everyone else on the lawn stared at me as I made my way towards the front door of the Inn. Some faces held looks of fear or respect, but most only held hatred. Screw it. I wasn't here to win any popularity contests.

I met Lela in the hall as I was walking back to our room. "What's with all of the hostility around here?" I asked bluntly.

She just stood there uncomfortably, obviously not wanting to answer my question. Instead she focused on tugging her black sweater down over her jeans, as if it didn't already fit her perfectly.

I raised my eyebrow at her and she stopped fidgeting.

"Basically," she began, "No one likes you, because you're involved in werewolf affairs, but you aren't a werewolf yourself. No one likes the rest of us, because we'd rather be led by a demon than one of our own."

"So why am I even here?" I asked. "I was under the impression that this was for the good of all of us."

Lela had stopped fidgeting. She was all business now. One of the reasons I liked her was that when she had a purpose, she got things done. One of the reasons I didn't like her was that when she didn't have a purpose, she was a crying mess looking for someone to take care of her.

Luckily, right now she had it together. "It *is* good for all of us. If it works it will offer us all a great deal of protection, but the fact still stands that the only reason we were even allowed to be a pack is that

Abel for some reason pushed our paperwork through." She explained. "When you have the leader of an entire sector pushing for you . . . well you get pushed."

I was well aware that Abel had been pushing for us, it was the why that I was fuzzy on. As far as I could tell, Abel liked us . . . and I didn't trust that one little bit. I just wasn't that likeable.

"Why do you think he did it?" I asked, suspicion clear in my voice.

She shrugged. "I'm guessing something to do with your dad. It seems like they have a lot of history." She smiled a half-smile. "Maybe he's just bored."

I was a seventeen year old, out of state and completely out of my league, all because of a werewolf's boredom . . . how comforting.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time. Almost 6:00. High time to get ready and get the evening over with.

I took a deep breath and turned back to Lela. "Ok, tell me about this evening. What do we have to wear and what do we have to do?"

Lela's eyes flicked around the room nervously. "We don't have to *do* much . . . but, we kind of have to dress up. Evening meetings for the whole group are formal. Morning meetings for the Alphas are mostly informal."

I shook my head and smiled. If wearing formal wear was the worst thing I had to do, I could deal. Why did I have the sneaking suspicion that dressing up was only the tip of the proverbial iceberg?

CHAPTER FOUR

Within an hour we had all marched back downstairs in our evening finery, which was seeming increasingly impractical as we tromped towards the meeting place in the middle of the woods.

I had been harangued into purchasing a crimson strapless dress that ended just below my knees in preparation for the occasion. It was nice and simple except for the fact that it was made of silk. The bodice was fitted, kind of corset style, but had no other embellishments to speak of.

The dress had cost a sizable chunk of the money I was awarded after the Dan incident. If anyone spit on it I would set their hair on fire, even though I'd probably never wear it again anyhow.

Lela was in black again, chic and simple with her hair twisted back in a simple bun. Lucy's deep purple dress had sheer cap sleeves with lots of sparkles that continued down onto the dress. It was *way* more flashy than Lucy's normal attire. Her heels were a shiny silver with more little sparkles set in the straps. Her black hair hung long and sleek, perfectly straight and shiny without any styling whatsoever.

I was the only girl without a coat. I was also the only girl not in heels. I could only be talked into so much. I didn't give a damn that my sneakers looked horribly out of place. I had four other dresses in garment bags in my closet. The sneakers would be worn with all of them. My hair was a scruffy looking mess like usual. I'd had a brief stint of actually styling it, but that had gotten old fast.

Jason looked rather snazzy beside me in charcoal dress pants and a shirt that was as dark as purple manages to get before it turns black. Someone had gotten Chase into a similar outfit but with black pants and a deep green shirt. They looked like they had been dressed to match.

As my two bodyguards I supposed it was appropriate. Lela had probably coordinated it. Heck, maybe she'd even bought the clothes for them. Jason could be pushed into shopping on occasion, but Chase would rather have his toenails pulled out then spend a day trying on clothes. I had expected Chase to look uncomfortable like me, but he actually wore his fancy attire quite well.

Why did Jason and Chase need to fit in, and why were they even

allowed to come to the meeting? My dad had arranged it. My dad wanted me to have bodyguards, and Abel wanted me to have a werewolf pack. Thus, strings were pulled, and we were all on our way to our first werewolf meeting. Allison, despite her protests, was staying in the room.

We had exited the inn to a very surreal scene. Werewolves of all ages were dressed to the nines and making their way towards the woods. No one looked awkward in their heels. They all walked with an eerie, boneless grace. I would have looked awkward.

The only thing to mar their perfect appearance were the lanyards with each individual's information dangling around their necks. I had my lanyard in my hand, rather than around my neck. I wasn't really sure if I wanted everyone to know who I was on sight, plus I hate lanyards.

I noticed a few side-long glances as we converged with the crowd. I did my best to ignore them. Wouldn't do to get in another fistfight on our very first day amongst the werewolves. Noticing a few of the wolves nearing our group, Jason and Chase took their posts on either side of me. A young couple hesitated, then walked away, but a single man in an all-black suit continued towards us.

We had to walk directly at him to stay in the flow of wolves entering the woods, and I wasn't about to swerve aside for him, so within a minute we were face to face.

He was tall, but fell a few inches short of Jason and Chase. I placed him around 5'10". A polite smile flooded his clean-shaven face. He had a strong jaw and full lips, very GQ . . . or at least what I imagine GQ to be. Slicked back blond hair completed his overly manicured appearance. He looked young to be so well put together. I placed him at around twenty. He held out a hand to me.

I stared at the hand like it was road-kill, but then, not wanting yet another enemy, I placed my hand in his. He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed it gently. Seriously? I fought to keep my discomfort off my face and failed.

I withdrew my hand, trying to hide my distaste.

Smile never faltering, he introduced himself. "I'm Devin. I presume you're Alexondra. I've heard so much about you."

What I wanted to say, was hi Devin, I've heard absolutely nothing about you. 'kay, bye, but what came out of my mouth was far more diplomatic. So diplomatic it made my teeth hurt.

"Nice to meet you Devin. Care to walk and talk? I don't want to get left behind." I gestured at the majority of the crowd disappearing in the distance.

"Why of course," he replied, holding out his suit clad arm for me to take.

In my experience that level of politeness meant either someone wanted something, or they were afraid of you. Devin didn't seem afraid, so the question was, what did he want? Ah well. With a shrug I placed my arm through his and began to walk towards the meeting place with the rest of my group trailing behind us. I thought I could almost sense Jason's discomfort, but maybe I was just projecting.

"You're warm," Devin commented. "Is that because of your demon blood?"

I stumbled at his words, but recovered quickly and managed to not fall on my face.

Devin chuckled. "Come now Alexondra. You know what we all are. It's only fair that we know a bit about you."

"It's Xoe," I corrected, then asked, "You can feel my temperature through your coat?"

"Yes," he replied as we veered towards the mountains and the larger trees. "We wolves run slightly hotter than humans, but not enough to be easily perceptible. You're like a little heater."

I didn't like being called little. Sure I'm slightly scrawny, but I'm also tall. I prefer to think I'm a lot more imposing than I actually am. I almost protested the remark. Yet, I was trying to be polite, and I couldn't think of a reason not to tell him, so I answered his question instead.

"It has to do with the specific line of demons I come from. We have freakishly fast metabolisms. Though, whether the heat fuels our powers, or is an aftereffect of them, I'm not sure."

"Interesting," Devin replied. "So I'm told you can create fire, what else can you do?"

It took a moment for me to register what he had said. He'd managed to gather a lot more intelligence than I would have thought.

"Oh no," I replied. "That's all you get. A girl has got to maintain a bit of mystery."

Devin smiled and nodded at my answer, then went on to the next subject without a hitch. "Have you been told what to expect from this meeting?"

I shrugged. "Not really, you werewolves can be a bit cryptic. All I know is that formal wear is a must."

Devin's smile returned. "Well you've got the formal wear down . . . except for the shoes, but there are a few more things you should know."

"And what are those things?" I prompted, getting impatient.

"You're petitioning to become a pack. There are many among us that will challenge your claims," he began.

Pssh, tell me something I didn't know. "Are you one of the challengers?" I asked. Subtlety is not my strong suit.

Devin shrugged gracefully. I've never managed the graceful shrug thing.

"I have a more casual interest in the matter," he answered. "A few of us have placed bets on the outcome."

I tried to pull my arm away from his, but he held on. "Don't worry Xoe," he soothed, "I'm on your side. I see no reason why you shouldn't become a pack. Plus, very few bet on you succeeding. I stand to win some serious cash."

"Lovely," I grumbled in response.

"Now don't be sore Xoe," Devin continued. "I was on your side even without the cash. These meetings can be so boring. We need a little excitement."

We had entered a clearing packed full of werewolves. A big group of them turned to glare at me. The woman who had tried to spit on me was at the front of that group.

"Happy to oblige," I told Devin, causing him to grin like the proverbial crocodile. I couldn't help the thought that grins like that tended to come back and bite you in the ass.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a space in the crowd which I assumed was for us. Devin led us over to that area, then finally let go of my arm. I expected him to weave through the crowd to find his group, but instead he went to stand by Abel in the center of the clearing. They were in cahoots. I should have known.

Jason took my arm that had been freed of Devin and led me to sit on a large rock in our part of the clearing. Glancing around, I realized that there were several large rocks that people were beginning to take their seats on. A few people ended up on the ground, but those of us in the front got rocks.

I looked back to see that the majority of the crowd wasn't even in the clearing at all. They stood amongst the trees. If I wasn't so against being there myself, I might have felt bad for their exclusion. As it was, I envied them.

I turned my attention back to my group, and realized that my group had diminished to just Chase, Jason, and me. Lela was shooing Max and Lucy back into the trees. I looked at Jason questioningly and he just shrugged apologetically.

Chase leaned in on my other side and whispered, "Only pack alphas in the center clearing."

"Then why are you and Jason still here?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Lela says."

I watched as the last few wolves filed themselves away into the woods, like smoke dissipating through the cracks. Their absence left fourteen distinct groups. I had expected more individual packs.

Each group had three to four wolves. From the way they were sitting, I guessed that the Alpha, and sometimes the Alpha's spouse were seated in front, all with two bodyguard types slightly behind them. I realized that Chase and Jason's rocks were slightly behind me. I guess Jason didn't qualify as my "spouse."

I guesstimated that there were about 50 figures standing in the woods now. That would mean 3-4 extra wolves per pack. I remembered Lela saying that the entire pack didn't have to attend the meetings each time, but we all had to be there to petition. I wondered how many members of the other packs weren't in attendance.

“Welcome,” Abel boomed, drawing everyone’s attention to him. He had kept the skintight pants, but had changed into a silken dress shirt the exact color of my dress. We were matching. He couldn't have planned it, there was just no way. Unless Lela had told him. The smile he gave me told me that it had most definitely been planned. Gre-eat.

“Let us get right down to business,” Abel went on, drawing his gaze away from me. “Who will be the first to update?”

“We will,” the woman who had tried to spit on me piped in. The black eye I had given her was already healing to a sickly yellow. Noticing my glance, she flipped a portion of her graying dirty-blonde hair over her eye.

The man sitting beside her rose to his feet. He was built like a highly-muscled bear with salt-and-pepper hair. He tugged his striped dress shirt straight, like he wasn’t used to dressing up. “What Greta means,” he grumbled, “is that *I* will begin.”

I sensed some marital strife there. Abel nodded and gestured for bear-man to begin. I got bored about two minutes into bear-man’s speech. He went on and on about pack laws broken, and punishments doled out. It went much the same with the next group. It didn't seem like Abel was even listening as he sat on the biggest rock in the center of the clearing.

As the third group began their “updates,” Devin came to crouch beside me. He leaned in way too close to me. I started to lean away, but realized he was trying to whisper in my ear. You had to whisper very softly around werewolves. Jason was close enough that with his vampire hearing, he’d probably hear everything that Devin whispered.

I held still as Devin practically kissed my ear, and whispered, “What updates will you present?”

I shrugged in response. We weren’t even officially a pack yet. How were we supposed to have updates.

Devin looked more than a little worried at my response. Apparently this update thing was more important than it seemed. Suddenly the talking had stopped and everyone’s attention was on me.

“Xoe,” Abel prompted. “Updates please?”

When I didn’t move, Devin pinched my leg. I jumped to my feet, sparing him a quick angry glare.

“Um . . . ” I stammered. “No rules broken, no punishments doled out.”

“You killed Nick,” Greta interrupted. “You killed one of us.”

“Actually Greta,” I practically spat her name out. “I didn’t kill him, but even if I did, he had just finished telling me about how he was going to slit my throat and feed me to a demon. Oh, did I mention that he kidnapped me first and held me hostage in a crypt?”

“You’re not even one of us,” Greta countered. “You shouldn’t be

here.”

“The woman is observant,” I mocked. “Somebody give her a prize.”

Greta stood and started towards me, face contorted with anger. She managed to avoid bear-man as he made a grab for her. Jason and Chase both moved in front of me, but there was no need.

Faster than my eyes could follow, Abel intercepted Greta and shoved her so hard that she went flying. Her flight was stopped short by a nearby oak tree that made a horrible cracking sound with the force of her impact. She fell to the ground and didn't move.

Bear-man simply rose, walked over, gathered up the crumpled Greta, and disappeared into the trees. Everyone else stood in complete silence.

Abel casually walked back into the center of the clearing. He clapped his hands together and bared his perfect white teeth in a smile that looked more like a snarl. “Updates! Who’s next?”

Devin grinned and patted my shoulder as he stood to go rejoin Abel. The leader of the next group stood and started rattling off small discretions and their accompanying punishments. Jason's nervous energy was giving me goosebumps and Chase looked positively green. It was good to know that I probably wasn't the only one who felt like maybe my stomach was going to force itself in its entirety out of my throat.

CHAPTER SIX

When updates finally finished there was food. And good thing, because I was starving. Then again, I was always starving. The more I worked on my powers, the more it upped my metabolism. I was hungry all the friggin' time.

Apparently during social/food time, we were supposed to disperse from our packs and get to know each other a little better. Jason got led away by Devin. It had been agreed upon earlier that either Chase or Jason would stay with me, so Chase simply refused to leave my side whenever someone tried to draw him or I away from each other.

When we were alone I glared up at him, "I can take care of myself you know."

"Of course," Chase conceded. "Let's get some food."

"But-" I began to argue. Chase put his arm around my shoulders and turned me to face the food table that had been brought in towards the end of updates.

"Oh fine," I gave in, seeing the spread of miniature sandwiches, cakes, and all sorts of fancy hors d'oeuvres. I walked out of Chase's arm and made a beeline for the table, with him catching up quickly behind me.

Chase stayed behind me, almost-touching, the entire time I gathered food. I could feel the line of his body about an inch away from my back.

I turned around and raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm not going to disappear you know."

He looked a question at me.

"Do you have to stand so close?" I clarified.

Chase had the courtesy to look embarrassed. "Sorry," he mumbled, and took a small step back.

"Don't you want anything?" I asked. "We haven't eaten since before our flight."

"Just throw me a few sandwiches on your plate?" he asked in return.

Without question, I added four more mini-sandwiches to the four I already had. It was lucky that the plates were big, even stacking everything up, all the food I grabbed wouldn't have fit on a normal

size plate. Chase grabbed us each a bottle of water and we headed to the edge of the clearing away from the crowd. Screw being social.

I sat so I could lean my back against a truly massive oak tree. Chase sat cross-legged in front of me, and I placed the food plate on the ground between us.

Chase looked at me like he wanted to say something, but was going to bite his tongue and stay quiet. He started to hum under his breath.

I sighed. “Quit with the dam humming and spit it out.”

Chase smiled ruefully. “You could have been a bit more diplomatic back there.”

“Why should I?” I questioned petulantly. “It’s not like Greta was trying too hard.”

“Greta isn’t trying to establish a werewolf pack,” Chase argued.

I frowned. “I thought you didn’t want me to have a werewolf pack. ‘Needless danger’ you called it.”

Chase frowned back. “I’d rather you not get involved in werewolf affairs, but now that you have, things could go very badly.”

I picked up one of our untouched sandwiches and took a bite. “Elaborate,” I demanded, mouth full of crumbs.

Chase picked up a sandwich, but didn’t eat. “You have a lot of enemies here Xoe. If your petition to form a pack is rejected, you won’t be protected under pack law.”

I dropped my sandwich back on the plate. How had I not thought of that? I'd just strolled on in like nothing could touch me.

I couldn’t think of a proper reply, so I just said, “Oh.”

“Yes Xoe. *Oh*,” Chase went on, his accent emphasizing the *oh*. “You need to start thinking things through a little better.”

“Like the guy who aligned himself with a rag-tag group of supernaturals?” I questioned. “All because you owe my demon dad some type of life debt? I’m sure that was well planned. And coming here? Will your debt ever end?”

“I don’t owe him a life debt,” Chase replied sharply. “He saved my life. Watching over you is the least I can do.”

“I don’t need you to *watch me*,” I replied sharply. “I have plenty of other people to *watch me*. I don’t even need watching!”

“Yes you do,” Chase grumbled. “If anything happened to you, your dad would-“

“So that’s the only reason you’re still around?” I interrupted. “Because you think my dad would blame you if you left and something happened to me?”

“No!” he shouted in exasperation, drawing a few stares. Lowering his voice, he continued, “You know that’s not the only reason I’m here Xoe.”

I clutched my water bottle, anger and hurt commingling rather than trying to win out over one another. I just stared at him, not sure whether to apologize, or throw my bottle at him.

At that moment, Max came trotting up and plopped down beside me, grabbing a sandwich from our forgotten plate.

"This is actually kind of cool," Max said, not picking up on the tension. "It's so weird going from being completely alone, to knowing and getting to know so many other people like me."

Chase and I both stared at the ground in silence.

"Uh oh," Max said in a sing-song voice. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing," Chase mumbled as he stood and dusted himself off.

Max turned to me questioningly.

"Nothing," I agreed, and grabbed my forgotten sandwich.

Lucy walked up and sat with us as Chase walked away. "What's his problem?" she asked.

"Nothing," I repeated.

"Yes, you keep on saying that," Max observed, "but all signs point to something."

Lucy frowned. "What did he say to you Xoe?"

I sighed loudly. "Nothing okay?"

I stood to leave . . . on second thought, I crouched back down and grabbed the food plate, shoving my water bottle underneath my arm. "I just need some air," I announced.

As I walked away I heard Max say, "But we're outside . . ."

Shaking my head, I continued walking, no destination in mind. Jason would be mad at me for going off alone, but screw it. I could take care of myself. I munched my sandwiches, which I now had way too many of, considering Chase had abandoned his share.

What was with him anyhow? Half the time he was a fun-to-be-around friend, the other half he was all broody. And yes, brooding can be cute, but it can also be very annoying.

All of the sudden Devin appeared at my side, causing me to jump and spill my food everywhere. All of my cute little sandwiches bounced into the dirt.

"Thanks," I said, handing him my empty plate as I continued walking.

He took it without hesitation and fell into stride beside me. "You shouldn't be walking around alone out here Xoe," he lectured. "Abel wanted me to make sure you don't get eaten."

"I have enough people watching over me," I snapped back. "Trust me."

"So what's the deal with you and the other demon?" Devin questioned, ignoring my comment.

I stopped walking mid-stride and gave him a very annoyed look.

“There is no deal,” I said sharply. “He works for my dad.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Just curious, no offense meant.”

I nodded and continued walking again.

“So . . . ” he went on. “You’re with the vampire then.”

I sighed. “Yes, I’m with the vampire.”

“Because it looked like-” Devin began, but stopped when he saw my glare.

“Why do you care anyhow?” I asked sharply.

Devin shrugged. I was tired of all of these men shrugging artfully at me. A real answer would be nice for a change.

As if reading my mind, Devin explained, “My place in this little microcosm is held because I know the correct information. I'd be a fool if I didn't continue to gather it.”

I stopped walking to stare at him. “And why, pray tell,” I asked, “is my relationship status important information?”

“For those that don't want to step on your toes,” he began, “knowing who you're with will help them to avoid doing so. This information is even more pertinent to those who would stomp all over your little feet, given the opportunity.”

I glared at him. “So what, you're trying to find out my weaknesses, so you can barter with the information?”

Devin shrugged again. “Or perhaps, I just want to make sure I don't step on your toes.”

I snorted. “You're doing a bang up job there champ. I think I might end up losing a toenail.”

I turned to keep walking, and much to my chagrin, he followed.

“I came out here alone for a reason, you know, because I wanted to be . . . alone,” I said.

“Well since you're so into motives,” he replied. “You can read into mine now, and deduce that I want the rest of your pack to like me too. Therefore I'm looking out for you, since you so carelessly ran away from your bodyguards whilst in a rather hostile environment.”

“You know, you're right,” I countered. “I should go find my bodyguards. I'd much rather be in that hostile environment, than out here walking with you.”

I turned around to walk back in the direction we'd come from, but stopped short at the sight of Jason speeding towards me.

Jason grabbed me into a hug as soon as he reached us, then held me out at arm’s length to give me steady eye-contact. “I could kill Chase,” he explained. “You’re not supposed to be alone.”

“I’m not,” I replied, freeing one of my arms to give Devin a slap on the chest. “I’ve got good ol’ Devin watching over me. Everyone is watching over me.”

Jason crinkled his eyebrows, confused at my anger.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Devin announced before quickly making his escape.

Jason kept his focus on me, his face still showing signs of confusion. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I really wish people would stop asking me that. I just wanted to go for a walk.”

“It’s too dangerous for you to be alone right now Xoe,” Jason lectured.

“Isn’t it always?” I mumbled as the rest of our group came trotting up to us.

“There’s a dance tonight,” Lucy announced proudly.

“Seriously?” I questioned. “Is this like, junior high summer camp or something?”

Lucy frowned and playfully hit me on the shoulder. “C’mon Xoe, we’re here, we may as well have fun with it.”

“And dancing became fun when?” I asked.

Lucy sighed. “It’s always been fun.” She reached out and grabbed my hand before I could protest. “Let’s go get ready.”

I didn’t have it in me to fight her. Weren’t we already dressed up? Was pack meeting dressed-up somehow different from dance dressed-up? Did I care? Whatever.

I’d had too many realizations/enlightenments today. Chase had a lot that he wasn’t telling me. We were at a werewolf summer camp. People wanted to kill me. Dancing has always been fun.

Most of these things I could believe, but dancing? Surely not.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I'm coming, end of story."

"No you're not," I assured.

"You, Xoe, would deny me a dance? I live for this kind of thing."

"The point Allison," I argued, "is that I want you to live."

Allison sighed. "I don't want to *die* Xoe. I just want to be a werewolf."

I glared at her. "You tried to become a vampire too. You really could have died in that process. Is it really worth dying over?"

Allison glared back. "It's my life Xoe. It's my choice."

"I'll make you a deal," I offered. "You can come with us to the dance, and any other fun activities, and I'm using the term fun very loosely here. You can come with us if you agree to wait on deciding to become a werewolf until after we get home."

"And how will I get someone to turn me once we're home?" She questioned.

I sighed. "You'll get to come out and meet all of the other werewolves. I'm sure you'll make some friends. You can seem charming to those who don't know any better."

She held out her hand to me without a second thought. "Deal."

We shook on it. No, I had not resigned myself to the idea of her becoming a werewolf. I would simply wait until we got home, then I'd lock her in a closet. Forever. Okay, maybe it wasn't the best plan, but at least this way I'd have time to think of something else. Maybe with time, she'd realize how ridiculous she was being. Yeah, and then we'd all ride away on our unicorns.

With our agreement out of the way, it was on to the horrible task of getting ready. I was in the girls' room with Lucy, Allison, and Lela. The boys were in the other room "getting ready," which meant watching TV and hogging the food from the complimentary gift basket that had been left waiting in our room.

Chase had given me the peace offering of some freshly gathered mini sandwiches when we had first gotten back to the room. It was a small consolation to him ruining our impromptu picnic, but it was a welcome one. Food was definitely the way to my heart.

Lucy and Lela were sharing the bathroom mirror, which left me all

alone and at the mercies of Allison. She was pawing through my clothes, but the only dress she liked was the one I had worn to the earlier event. I probably should have been offended, but I didn't care. Personal style wasn't really my strong suit, and I was okay with that.

Slamming my suitcase shut, she marched over to the closet. I glanced inside to see that she had a row of garment bags already hung up with several pairs of shoes on the floor. She unzipped one of the bags and nodded her approval. Without looking, she crooked her finger at me to gesture that I should come to the closet.

I almost didn't do it, but I wanted Allison to keep her promise. I hadn't even reached the closet when she threw the garment bag at me and focused her attention on her selection of shoes. I laid the garment bag on the nearest bed and slowly unzipped it, dreading what was inside.

A medium length, jewel-green dress with delicate beading at the neck stared back at me. I removed it from the bag to find that the part that was supposed to cover my back was composed of a few thin strings of the same tiny, glittering beads that decorated the front. The dress had a high halter neck, so at least it wouldn't slip off.

I threw the dress back on the bed. "No way Al. Absolutely not."

Ignoring me, Allison walked over to the bed holding a pair of silver strappy sandals. Silver strappy sandals with four-inch heels.

My instincts screamed at me to run, which I wouldn't be able to do once I put the shoes on. I looked down at the offending footwear. "You realize you're asking me to risk my life with those?"

Allison smiled the wicked smile she always wears when she gets to dress me up. "You'll be fine Xoe. You're lucky you wear the same size shoe as me . . . enjoy it."

She dropped the shoes into my waiting hands and walked away towards the bathroom, no doubt to observe and critique Lucy's makeup. I looked down at the dress again. May as well get it over with.

I checked to make sure that the adjoining door to the boys room was locked and slipped out of my crimson dress. I still didn't see why I had to wear a whole new dress when I'd only worn the other one for a few hours. I struggled with the stringy non-straps of the new dress, being careful not to pull them too hard. When I finally got the thing pulled up and zipped, I went and did a quick twirl in front of the mirror above the room's generic desk.

The dress actually fit like a glove, and looked far less skanky than I thought it would. The neckline was cut high enough to balance out the revealing back. I instantly knew that Allison had brought it for me, with how tight it was on me, it never would have fit over her curves.

I humored myself with another twirl. The dress would work. The

shoes on the other hand, I was still not sold on. I grudgingly put them on and walked around the room feeling like a newborn baby horse.

Allison exited the bathroom long enough to grab my hand and pull me back in with her. I clomped after her nearly spraining my ankle several times along the way.

The bathroom was rather spacious inside, especially compared to the size of the rest of the inn. Allison patted the gold-veined marble counter-top in-between the double sinks. With a grimace, I hopped up onto the counter to sit in front of her. I was pleased to find that I could at least sit in the dress comfortably.

Allison grabbed her makeup bag from the counter and observed my face like an artist looking at a blank canvas. I knew I'd have to go without concealer, since Allison, Lucy, and Lela are all darker than me. I wasn't about to cry over it.

The first thing she grabbed out of her bag of tricks was eyeliner, and I cringed. Putting eyeliner on yourself is scary enough, having someone else shoving a stick towards your eyes is downright nerve-wracking. I fidgeted so much while she tried to do it that she finally had to have me sit with my back and the back of my head against the wall so I couldn't pull away from her. She finally smudged enough on to make her happy, then she tortured me with mascara as well.

When she finally finished, Allison instructed me to look it over in the mirror. I appreciated that she hadn't gone overboard. The dark gray eyeliner was way more than I was used to, mainly since no makeup was what I was used to, but overall I could deal. The shoes still had to go.

A knock resounded at the adjoining door. I took my cue to escape the bathroom and ran (as much as one can run in four-inch heels) to unlock and open the door.

It was Jason, and he stopped dead in his tracks. He gave me the once-over while I waited patiently. The second once over elicited foot tapping on my part.

"Well?" I huffed.

"Woah," was the only reply I got.

Max walked past Jason into the room, then stopped and turned to me. "Woooah," he grinned, then turned to high-five Jason.

I walked back towards the bathroom. "That's it, I'm changing."

Allison met me at the door to the bathroom and forced me back out into the bedroom. "No way Xoe. Our deal includes me getting to dress you."

I tried to push past her, but I couldn't seem to get much traction in the heels. "Oh no, we never agreed on that."

"It was totally implied!" she exclaimed.

Suddenly I was lifted up and carried back to the center of the

bedroom. Jason set me down and turned me to face him. “You look lovely Xoe. We didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

I looked at Max with a raised eyebrow.

He grinned back at me. “I totally meant to embarrass you, but if you must know, you look fantastic. Tall, but fantastic.”

Chase finally came into the room to see what all of the commotion was. He spared me any comments. He simply smiled and did his best to not look me up and down. At least he was back to meeting my eyes again.

Allison came to stand in front of me with crossed arms. She tsk-ed under her breath. “Now what am I going to do with your hair?”

I shrugged. “Leave it?”

She held up a finger gesturing for me to wait where I was and disappeared into the bathroom. She re-emerged with hairspray, a brush, and a little cardboard tab of bobby pins. Crap.

When she finished, my hair was in a loose up-do, with little braids twisted in and strands of hair falling strategically around my face.

When I finally escaped her, I went to sit next to Max on the bed to wait on the rest of the girls to get ready. Chase and Jason stood leaning against the wall looking bored out of their minds. The three boys were all still wearing their clothes from earlier. Being a girl is *so* not fair.

“We should have a signal,” Max stated suddenly.

I turned and eyed him suspiciously. “Go on,” I prompted.

“We should have a signal,” he explained, “so we can alert each other whenever we need to be rescued from a dance, or a conversation. Some of the people here are a little intense.”

Chase chuckled.

“Okay, what happened?” I asked, searching for an explanation.

Max began to blush.

Chase grinned a little wider, baring his teeth. “Max has an . . . admirer.”

I laughed and turned back to Max. “Tell me. Is she hot?”

Max paled. “She's twelve.”

“What!” I shouted. Taken aback. “Is she a werewolf?”

“Apparently,” Max answered, “lycanthropy can be transmitted from a mother to her child. It makes sense I guess, since it's in the blood.”

I paled. “Holy crap, a baby werewolf?”

Max shook his head. “I asked about her. Children born with lycanthropy don't turn the first time until they're ten or so.”

“Uh,” I began. “A ten year old werewolf is still pretty bad.”

Max nodded. “Which is why she's mainly just been raised around her own kind. She's been pretty sheltered.”

I smiled again, I couldn't help it. “So a twelve year old, sheltered werewolf has a crush on you?”

Max sighed loudly in response.

The whole idea was too creepy for words. Not a little girl's crush, but the way the little girl had been forced to live.

I patted Max on the shoulder. “I'll do my best to save you from the little werewolf if you want, or you could just be nice and dance with her. She's probably pretty lonely without any friends her age.”

Max looked at me grumpily. “Can't you do it?”

I shook my head. “Sorry buddy, you have been chosen.”

Max put his head in his hand as the bathroom door finally opened and the girls pranced out. Allison was in a lacy white dress, cut high in the neck like mine, but also cut rather short at the leg. Her shapely legs looked about ten miles long, especially with the expensive looking, black stiletto ankle boots she was wearing. A thick black belt around her waist completed the look.

Lela was in basic black again, but whereas her dress from earlier had been simple, the one she was wearing now was bedecked with lace and sparkle. The entire top from armpits up was made of sheer lace. It looked uncomfortable as hell, and I was suddenly very glad for my dress. Lela's black heels weren't as high as mine or Allison's, but then again she didn't need any help making her legs look long anyhow.

Lucy was in crimson, and it made her olive skin stand out in stunning contrast. Her dress was simple, but fit her perfectly to accentuate her petite frame. Her shoes looked like the twin of Lela's.

I gestured towards the door. “Let’s go get this over with.”

We all left the room and made our way towards the stairs. Allison led the way like she owned the place, of course.

As soon as she was far enough ahead, Jason shuffled up beside me. “Why is Allison even coming?” he whispered.

“We made a deal,” I answered simply.

“But it’s probably not a good idea to let her meet werewolves that could potentially turn her,” he went on.

“Just like it probably wasn’t a good idea to keep me in the dark about Allison wanting someone to change her in the first place.”

“I thought I had talked her out of it,” he countered.

I shook my head. “If there’s one important thing to learn about Allison, it’s that you can never talk her out of anything.”

Chase walked up on my other side to join our conversation. “Sounds like somebody else I know.”

Jason chuckled. He looked my outfit up and down. “At least she can be talked *in* to stuff.”

Chase laughed in return. Oh man, they were banding together

against me. Now I'd never get anything accomplished, and with the heels I couldn't even run away.

Instead of running, I walked as fast as I could to catch up with the rest of our group. Chase and Jason fell behind, making wisecracks that I chose not to hear.

Max and Allison walked as far away from each other as possible without actually leaving the group. I joined arms with Lucy and walked a little farther ahead. I *so* didn't need to deal with their drama on top of everything else. We exited the front door and continued walking. The dance was being held, wait for it . . . in the woods. Big surprise there.

"I can't believe you actually want to go to this thing," I mentioned to Lucy conversationally.

"Yeah, well it could be fun," she answered, not meeting my eyes.

"Please, someone explain to me how this is supposed to be fun," I said sarcastically.

"Dancing can be fun Xoe. It might be nice to dance with . . . people," Lucy replied hesitantly.

Aha, the truth comes out. "And which people, pray tell, might be fun to dance with?" I prodded.

Lucy looked behind us to see how far back the others had fallen. We had a good bit of distance between us.

"Wait," I began, then asked, "Max?"

Lucy sighed. "No, not Max."

"Well I know it's not Jason," I prompted.

Lucy looked down at the ground. "It's Chase," she mumbled.

Wait, Lucy liked Chase? I definitely had not expected this. I mean, I shouldn't care really, but I did. I hated that I did. I loved Jason. I knew for a fact that he loved me back. I shouldn't give a damn who Chase dated. Damn . . . I totally cared.

I stumbled at her words, and in four-inch heels it was quite a stumble. Luckily since my arm was linked in Lucy's, I managed not to fall. "So . . . you like Chase?" I asked, looking for verification.

Lucy gave me a sharp look. "Not so loud Xoe!" she hissed.

"Okay," I soothed, "sorry. How long have you liked him?"

Lucy shrugged as a blush crept up her neck to her face. "I dunno," she mumbled. "For a while I guess. Do you think it's a bad idea?"

Did I think it was a bad idea? So many different ways to answer her question flooded through my mind, but none of them seemed good enough. None of them seemed honest either.

"Uh, do you think he likes you?" I asked in return, completely at a loss.

Lucy eyed me suspiciously. "Why are you getting all weird about this? Did he say something to you?"

“No,” I answered quickly. “You just caught me off guard. I didn't realize he was your type.”

“Since when do I have a type?” she asked.

I nodded and smiled. “Good point. I guess what I meant was,” I began, “well, I don't really know what I meant. You just caught me off guard.”

“So do you think it's a bad idea?” she prompted again.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “No, I think it's a great idea.”

Lucy smiled. I felt queasy. Sometimes the right answer isn't always the honest one.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jason walked up and put his arm around me. “What’s wrong?” he whispered. “You look all flushed.”

“Just feeling overheated again,” I mumbled, waving my hand in front of my face to emphasize my point.

Lucy fell back to join the rest of the group as Jason gave my shoulders a reassuring squeeze, then led me on towards the meeting place. I had an urge to look behind us and see how close Chase and Lucy were walking. Don’t worry, I resisted. I looked down at the ground instead, feeling like a terrible person.

In the time it had taken us to get ready, the barren meeting place had been completely transformed. Silken tents hung from the trees and glowed with the light of strategically placed candles. Some sort of hard surface had been lain for the dance floor. The wolves were dressed in gowns and tuxedos. Those who danced swayed to softly played, classical music. It all looked like something out of a fairytale. You had to hand it to them, werewolves sure knew how to throw a party.

By the time we arrived, the last slivers of sunlight had long since disappeared behind the mountains. The lack of sunlight left the dance area almost too dark. Then again, werewolves have some pretty impressive night vision, so they probably didn’t worry too much about sufficient lighting.

Tensions seemed to have eased since the earlier meeting. Nobody paid us much mind. Lela and Allison were almost instantly snatched up as dance partners. Only moments later Lucy and Chase were snatched up as well . . . luckily not by each other.

I mentally slapped myself on the wrist for my thoughts as Jason twirled me out onto the dance floor. I had to catch myself against his chest to keep from falling. I laughed, “Remember the heels.”

“I will not let you fall,” he assured with a smile.

I tried to move and sway as effortlessly as those surrounding me, but I’ve just never been a good dancer. I’ve got decent coordination . . . decent enough to play sports at least, but the rhythm of dancing is simply beyond me. Jason didn’t seem to mind as he gently spun me about, probably just enjoying the fact that I hadn’t argued about

dancing with him in the first place.

As the music slowed, he drew me in close. “You seem very tense tonight,” he observed.

I took a deep breath and tried to release a bit of the tension. “It’s been a long day,” I explained.

He leaned down and kissed me softly, as if I might break. I didn't like the imagery of me being delicate, so I kissed him back fiercely. For a brief wonderful moment, everyone around us disappeared and it was just us two.

Our kiss was interrupted by someone tapping on Jason’s shoulder. I opened my eyes to see Devin waiting patiently for our attention. He was dressed in all black again, just a slightly fancier version of all black.

Devin dipped his head in acknowledgment of my presence, then turned to Jason. “May I cut in?” he intoned.

He seriously chose that moment to interrupt us? He couldn't have waited a few more seconds? I looked at Jason and thought say no, say no, say no over and over again.

Jason gave me an apologetic smile. “Why of course,” he answered.

Damn. Devin held out his hand to me and I reluctantly took it. His hands were rougher than I expected. I hadn’t really pegged Devin as the hard labor type, but his hands bespoke a past, or maybe even a present, of hard work without gloves. I couldn't really picture Devin building furniture or installing tile. Maybe he gardened.

Devin led me away from Jason. He kept my hand in his, then placed his other hand lightly at my waist. He stood closer to me than I would have liked, but the dancing would have been awkward if he stood any farther. In the heels I was an inch or two taller than him.

“You’ve made quite an impression on our little community,” he explained as we swayed slowly on the dance floor.

“Not on purpose,” I mumbled. I tried to ignore the discomfort I felt at his hand at my waist. Yet another reason to not like dances. Too many people had an excuse to touch you.

I searched the crowd for someone to save me. Jason had disappeared. My eyes came across Chase, who was dancing with a petite, red-headed werewolf. He met my gaze and held it until Devin spun me in a different direction.

I couldn’t find anyone else I knew, so I figured I may as well make some conversation. “So . . . ” I began, “which pack is yours?”

“I don’t have one,” Devin answered with an almost proud smile.

“Aren’t werewolves, like, vulnerable without a pack?” I asked.

Devin shrugged. “If you find a pack for me to lead, let me know.”

I furrowed my brow. “Why would you be the one to lead it?”

Devin swung me out and into a spin under our joined hands. He

had to catch me behind my back before I fell. He chuckled at my clumsiness and held me a little too tightly.

“Do that again,” I warned, “and you’ll end up with third degree burns.”

“Sorry,” he conceded, but didn't loosen his grip. “No more spins. To answer your question, I’m too strong for any Alpha to let me into their pack for fear of a challenge. I’d have to form my own. I’m fine working with Abel for now. I’ve got diplomatic immunity.”

I laughed. “And you were betting on me? Isn’t it against the rules for politicians to take bets on the outcome of upcoming votes?”

Devin shrugged. “I never claimed to be a good politician. Actually, I'm really a rather terrible politician.”

“Well you've got the charm down,” I replied, “for those who can't see through it.”

“And here I thought I had you fooled,” Devin joked. “I'm more off my game than I thought.”

After a moment of just dancing, he spoke again. “I'm actually surprised you came to this tonight. It's not a mandatory event.”

I glared at him. I've been told I have a pretty good glare, but he just kept on smiling.

“The girls wanted to come,” I explained. “Don't ask me why.”

“Well you look lovely,” he replied. “I like you with your hair up.”

I glared even harder. “If you're trying to flirt with me, you should know that you're howling up the wrong tree.”

Devin laughed. “Sorry, it's in my nature, the charm and all. I don't mean anything by it.”

I scowled, but said nothing. I had a feeling that Devin meant something by every little thing he did.

“My you are quite a tough nut to crack,” he continued casually. “Most people really do find me charming.”

I smiled sweetly back at him. “Most people are also morons.”

“Well put,” he replied. “Though you are a demon attempting to form a werewolf pack. Some might question your intelligence.”

I raised my eyebrows at him, surprised he had finally said something insulting. “Good thing I'm not here to prove my intelligence.”

He laughed. “Nope, you're here to prove your brawn. I think you'd probably have a better time with intelligence.”

I smirked at him. “You'd be surprised.”

Devin laughed again. “I've no doubt about that.”

The music changed tempo again. Two songs was enough. I could probably escape now. I pulled away.

“I have got to go find my boyfriend,” I announced, just to once again verify that Devin wasn’t getting any funny ideas.

I didn't think he was, but you couldn't be too cautious with such things. He pulled back and kissed my hand and I let him. He could make out with the back of my palm all he wanted, if it meant I didn't have to dance with him anymore.

I pulled my hand away and wove my way through dancing couples in search of Jason. Who I found was Chase. He was sitting on a small bench next to Lela with a plate of food in his lap.

I hurried over to sit on the bench beside him before someone else could pull me into a dance. We sat in silence for a few minutes. Another handsome werewolf came and pulled Lela back out onto the floor. She went willingly. I looked down at Chase's untouched food.

"Why aren't you eating," I questioned.

Chase shrugged. "I'm not hungry, but the plate of food seems to be a deterrent for any girls hoping to make me dance more." He nodded his head off to our left.

Four women were standing there watching him, waiting for him to finish eating. Now that was just plain creepy. I'd never been to an actual dance, but I sincerely hoped that the people I went to school with weren't nearly as . . . predatory as the werewolves seemed to be.

Some random guy in a dark gray suit came striding towards us. "Crap," I muttered. "Give me your plate."

"No way," Chase argued. "They'll pounce as soon as I put it down."

The guy was getting closer. I grabbed the corner of Chase's plate and tried to tug it away from him. He tugged back. "I don't think so," he whispered. "I've already been groped by three different women. You've only danced with one guy so far."

I tugged harder. "Yeah, but it was a super long dance."

Chase tugged back. The paper plate ripped and sent food flying to land right by the feet of the guy now standing in front of us.

"Would you like to-" the guy began.

I handed the guy my half of the paper plate. "Sorry, just got asked," I mumbled.

Chase chucked his plate half into a nearby trashcan as I dragged him out onto the dance floor. He wrapped his arms around me hesitantly. "I thought the idea was to not have to dance."

"Better with you than with some random guy," I grumbled.

Chase smiled. "Well maybe I'd rather dance with some random girl."

"Well then maybe you should have just given me your plate," I retorted.

He sighed loudly. "As long as you don't try and grope me, I guess I can deal with it."

I laughed, glad Devin hadn't tried to grope me.

"These shoes make you really tall," Chase remarked.

“And really unstable,” I added. “So please, no dramatic spins.”

He tsk’ed at me. “There you go, ruining all of my fun.”

I noticed Lucy dancing with Max, while she gave me a confused and slightly hurt look. Great, now Lucy was going to be mad at me for stealing her dance. I really had no choice . . . honest. I glanced past Lucy and Max to see a little girl with long brown hair giving Lucy the same look that Lucy had given me.

This was all just too uncomfortable. I looked around for Jason, to see if I could maybe give some girl dancing with him a hurt and confused look, but he was still nowhere to be found.

“I’m sorry again about earlier,” Chase added, drawing my attention back to him.

I bit my lower lip. “It’s okay,” I mumbled in reply. “I overreacted. I’ve been a bit . . . tense lately.”

See? Who says I can’t be diplomatic?

Chase lifted my chin up so I’d meet his eyes. It was weird being at almost exactly eye-level with him. The somewhat intimate gesture made my pulse speed up.

“I’m not here for your dad,” Chase stated. “Not anymore. We don’t need to discuss it any further than that. I just want you to know. I’m here because I want to look out for you, not because I have to.”

Oh geez. What the heck was I supposed to say to that? I looked back down. “Um . . . thanks.”

He nodded, as if an 'um thanks' was a sufficient response to what he had said. I had a feeling in my stomach like I either needed to throw up, pass out, or scream. Things were getting way too complicated.

“I wish we were home,” I whispered.

“Me too,” Chase replied. He was silent for a moment, then went on. “So, speaking of home, what's going to happen when we get there?”

I pulled back a little so I could meet his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Chase shrugged. “Since the time I first met you we've been dealing with one issue or another. This is the last issue. If everything works out, what will we do when we get back home?”

“Well,” I began, not knowing what to say. “I still have school . . .”

Chase nodded but didn't reply and I started to feel like a total ass. He was asking if I wanted him to stay in town. I should have told him to do whatever he wanted. I should have told him to go and find a nice demon girl to date.

“I'll still need help with my lessons,” I began, “so, you know . . . you should stick around.”

Chase nodded and held me a little tighter. I didn’t protest. Bad

Xoe. Very, very bad Xoe.

"Plus, your mom would be totally bummed if I left," Chase joked, trying to lighten the mood.

I laughed so abruptly that I almost choked. "I will *never* understand why she likes you so much. I wouldn't be surprised if when we got back she invited you to live with us."

Chase smiled. "Well, I wouldn't put it past her, but I think my connection to your dad might stop her."

I nodded. "Which is why I'm surprised she likes you in the first place. She wants absolutely nothing to do with my dad. Anytime I mention him she clams up and goes all pale, so I've just stopped trying. It would be nice to be able to have my lessons at home, but I guess I understand where she's coming from too."

"Well she did see him kill a guy," Chase added.

"Well yeah," I argued, "but it was in defense of us. The guy pushed my baby stroller over apparently."

"Well look at you," Chase taunted, "actually *defending* your father."

"Only on that one little act," I sulked. "I have *not* forgotten my abandonment."

Chase looked at me seriously. "He talked about you a lot, before you actually met."

I gave him a questioning look. "What would he have to talk about? He didn't even know me."

"He checked in on you," he replied. "even though you didn't know it."

"And how do you even know this?" I asked, feeling flustered.

Chase flushed a little at that. "Well, I went along a few times . . . when he checked on you."

"You what!" I exclaimed, eliciting a few questioning stares from the nearest dancers. I lowered my voice, "You *spied* on me?"

"No," Chase said calmly. "I *checked* on you, along with your father. Sometimes when he couldn't make it, he'd send me to check on you by myself."

"Um," I began nervously, "How long ago did you start *checking* on me."

The thought of Chase seeing me as a nerdy, gangly preteen gave me shivers. The thought of him knowing I used to wear high-waters everyday, because I could never find jeans long enough for me was even worse.

Chase smiled. "Only in the past two years."

Oh thank the gods . . . but still, it rankled that Chase had *known* me in a sense for the past two years, when I only first met him around a month ago.

"Well, I just don't like this at all," I decided out loud.

Chase chuckled. “Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you went through a Shakira faze.”

Well damn.

CHAPTER NINE

Before I realized it, several songs had passed. We didn't see any of our would-be escorts in sight, so Chase and I went looking for the rest of our group. We'd only been there maybe 30 minutes, but it was so past time to get back to our rooms. We'd made an appearance, and that was good enough dammit.

We managed to gather up Lucy and Max pretty quickly. Lela and Allison had to be pried from a group of men fawning over them. All that was left was Jason . . . and we couldn't find him. I went from being pissed that he'd abandoned me, to slightly worried.

After combing the entire gathering area, we started sweeping outwards into the woods. We split into pairs: Lucy with Allison, Chase with Lela, and me with Max. Each pair had one wolf to help scent Jason out.

After only about a minute I got tired of Max having to catch me, so I took off the heels in favor of walking barefoot. There was only a sliver of moon in the sky (a werewolf gathering near the full moon would have been disastrous). I just hoped that I wouldn't find any snakes or spiders with my bare feet.

Several more minutes of stumbling through the underbrush, and we finally heard voices. Well, Max heard voices, and made a shushing motion at me as we crept forward, then I finally heard them. There were four figures in a clearing ahead of us. One looked like Jason, but in the dark I couldn't be sure. I looked at Max for verification and he nodded.

I leaned against a nearby tree so I could go on tip-toes and try and get a better look. As my hands pushed against the rough bark, the tree made a loud cracking sound. I cringed and turned my attention back to the clearing.

All four figures had whipped around to stare in the direction of the noise. Without a word spoken, the Jason-looking figure strode in our direction, leaving the other three to stand and stare.

When what was indeed Jason reached us, he grabbed my shoulders and steered me back towards the dance, leaving Max to follow. I stubbed my toe on a tree root as he hurried me along. He caught me before I went down, but I was still pissed.

“What the heck is going on?” I spat, trying to ignore the pain in my toe.

“Why aren’t you wearing shoes?” Jason asked, ignoring my question.

“Oh, I dunno,” I said sarcastically. “It was a little difficult to go wandering through the woods in four-inch heels, in search of my boyfriend who abandoned me all night.”

Jason bit his tongue before he could say something to further piss me off. Max stayed out of it. Very wise of him.

Without another word, Jason gathered me up in his arms and started carrying me purposefully back towards the gathering. I was too confused to fight much, so I just wrapped my arms around his neck and waited. I’d tear him a new one once we were back in our rooms.

We got close to the gathering, and what I hoped would be where I could walk for myself again. No such luck. Jason skirted around the clearing, avoiding any onlookers.

“Max,” Jason ordered. “Get the others.”

Max left us without another word.

I’d had enough. I went through the visualization my dad had taught me. Soon enough I was being dropped to my feet as Jason raised a hand to his burned neck. It was only a mild burn, like a bad sunburn, but the initial shock was enough to get Jason to put me down.

“You need to explain what's going on,” I said calmly with my feet firmly planted on the ground, then added, “Right now.”

Jason stared at me in consternation, his lips in a tight, unrelenting line. “I didn’t know there would be other vampires here,” he replied.

Other vampires? A million thoughts raced through my head. I knew quite a bit about vampires, seeing as I was dating one. Yet, Jason wasn't scary to me, he was just . . . Jason. Other vampires were scary. They were also rare.

Few victims survived the transition to become vampires. Those that did tended to be loners, or stayed with relatively small groups. I had assumed I'd go my whole life without bumping into another one, or at least not so soon.

“What?” I questioned.

“Other vampires,” he affirmed. “Several of the packs hired them. Apparently they’re afraid of you and your father . . . mainly your father. They wanted back up just in case.”

Now I was really confused. How were people supposed to be scared of me when I'd just give them sunburns . . . or set their cars on fire, or maybe burn them to death. Ok, I was moderately scary. Now my dad I understood, he is much more than moderately scary.

“But, he’s not here,” I argued.

“They’re being cautious,” he explained, wiping his palm nervously across his face. Jason had to be pretty worked up for his nervous ticks to show this much. “After Dan, and then Nick . . . werewolves tend to gossip. Stories get embellished.”

“So why hire vampires?” I asked.

“Since vampires don't have much affiliation group-wise, they often tend to work as mercenaries of a sort,” he answered.

I shrugged. “Okay, that still doesn’t explain why you ditched me all night to have a mysterious meeting in a clearing with a gang of vampire mercenaries.”

“I know two of the other vampires that were hired,” he admitted with a shrug. “I needed to make sure that they meant you no harm. Most vampires aren’t like me. They would kill you simply to see what your blood tasted like. Rarely do you find a demon of any magnitude vulnerable. Chase may be in danger of being attacked as well.”

“So basically, more monster-types out for my blood?” I asked.

Supernaturals really did have a weird obsession with blood. Vampires needed it, werewolves reacted to it, bad people tried to steal it for nefarious purposes. Not for the first time I found myself glad that the only blood I needed or wanted was the stuff running through my veins.

Jason nodded. “We shouldn't have come here. We need to be careful.”

I sighed. “Like that’s anything new. I’m almost constantly with a vampire, another demon, and three werewolves. I wouldn’t say I’m exactly vulnerable.”

Jason grabbed my shoulders to emphasize his point. “Some of them are stronger than me. I can't protect you.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, eyebrow raised. “I’m not worried until I find out they’re stronger than *me*.”

I turned around and sauntered away. That’s right ladies and gentlemen, Xoe Meyers can saunter. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

CHAPTER TEN

I woke up beside Jason. I was still slightly peeved, but he had apologized once we got back to the room, and I had been in serious need of some snuggling. He really was just looking out for my best interest, even though he was doing it in an overbearing way.

I had done my best not to think about Chase lying silently on his cot. I would have given a large sum of money to know what he was thinking. Then again, maybe it was best that I didn't know. He was my friend and I refused to let things get awkward.

Sensing that I was awake, Jason snuggled me closer. Jason doesn't sleep, so when we stay the night together, he usually just lies next to me waiting for me to wake. Sounds boring to me, but he doesn't seem to mind.

I turned over to glance at the clock. 6:30am. Ick. I had a breakfast meeting to go to at 8:00. I was the only one of our group allowed at the meeting. I had to present my proposal to form our pack. Lela had helped me write it, but I was still worried. Public speaking is not my forte.

I gave Jason a smile, then rolled out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom to take a shower. Chase seemed to be asleep, and Max was just a lump under his blankets. Before I could pass through the doorway, Jason was just suddenly there in front of me. He pulled me in and tried to kiss me.

"Hey man," I argued in a whisper, pushing against his chest. "Morning breath."

Jason shrugged. "Don't care,"

I shrugged in return, and pulled his face down to my level. The kiss started out soft, then intensified, making me forget all about my morning breath. I leaned against Jason's chest to assure that my footing remained stable.

Jason took this as a sign to kiss me further, his hands tightly gripping the sides of my waist. With all of the stress in our lives, we had kind of let our relationship fall to the sidelines. I realized that Jason had been so intent on being my bodyguard, that he had forgotten to be my boyfriend. I'd been so intent on trying to take care of everyone, that I hadn't been paying him much attention either.

We heard a throat clear somewhere beside us. Jason and I both pulled away from the kiss to regard the interruption. Chase was standing in front of us looking grumpy and half-asleep. There was no way Jason hadn't heard him walking up. I glared up at Jason.

“Um,” Chase mumbled. “I need to use the bathroom.”

My face flared with heat that had nothing to do with my demon powers. I tried to flee the bathroom doorway as quickly as possible to hide my blush. Jason laughed as he followed me out into the main room.

Max was awake and perched on his bed, because I totally needed someone else to observe my embarrassment. “Are you overheating again or something?” he questioned.

Jason walked up to hug me from behind. Max glanced at the bathroom where Chase was, then back to us. His mouth formed into an “O” of understanding. I blushed even harder as I hurried to the adjoining room door. I would be showering in the girls’ room today.

All of the girls were still soundly asleep. I would have been soundly asleep too if I had any other choice. I crept past their beds and into the bathroom, shutting the door gently behind me.

I undressed and hopped into the shower. I turned on the water, standing clear so as not to get hit by the initial cold water, but my efforts were in vain. Someone had left the shower nozzle pointing outwards, and since I hadn’t closed the curtain yet, water sprayed all over the bathroom. It completely soaked my pajamas as well as the small towel that was placed on the floor. Gre-eat.

I adjusted the shower head and closed the curtain. I’d clean up the mess later. Finding that someone had left their travel bottles of shampoo and conditioner in there, I helped myself. I hate those little hotel two-in-one shampoo/conditioners, and I wasn’t really in a mood to be polite.

The shampoo smelled strongly of some herb, maybe rosemary. My guess was that the shampoo belonged to Lela. It seemed like her kind of scent. I absorbed myself into the smell, trying to relax a little. I had just promised myself that I wouldn’t let things get awkward with Chase, and here I was, hiding in the shower, feeling embarrassed and awkward. Stupid boys. I was actually kind of glad that I got to go to this morning's meeting by myself.

When I finally stepped out of the shower and dried myself off with one of the white towels that the inn supplied, I realized that I’d forgotten to grab a change of clothes, and my pajamas were thoroughly soaked. Damn.

I wrapped my towel around me as tightly as possible and went out into the bedroom. I sat down by a sleeping Lucy and attempted to shake her awake. She mumbled something unintelligible at me, then

rolled over, burrito-ing herself up in her blankets.

I tried Allison next. She actually half woke up. “What d’you want?” she mumbled.

“I left my suitcase in the other room,” I whispered back.

Allison frowned at me as she woke up a bit more. “So go get it loser.”

I stood, showing her that I was just in a towel.

“Stop being a baby,” she grumbled before burying her face back in her pillow. Double damn.

I readjusted my towel and made my way back to the boys' room, hoping they had all gone to breakfast. Sadly, only either Max or Jason had gone. I didn't know which since one of them was in the closed bathroom with the shower running. A freshly showered, and thankfully dressed Chase was sitting on his cot putting his shoes on.

Feeling like I was in a really cheesy romantic comedy, I silently walked over to my suitcase that I’d left between the room’s two beds. I was ignoring Chase so hard, that I didn’t realize he’d gotten up to walk towards the door. I turned around with my clothes clutched against my chest, and almost ran straight into him.

We both stared at each other for a moment. He tugged at the bottom edge of his shirt like it needed to be adjusted. “Um, sorry about earlier-” he began.

“No problem,” I interrupted before he could say something to make me feel even more embarrassed.

I clutched my towel tightly and looked down at the floor, not wanting to discuss it further.

He just stood there, at a loss for words. Dark, slightly wavy hair slicked back with moisture, looking scrumptious. Oh geez.

I brushed past him as quickly as possible and bolted back into the girls’ room. Not awkward at all, and my name is Queen Elizabeth Mary.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After I got dressed I marched back into the boys' room, head held high. I was all ready to be smooth and not at all awkward.

“Why are you walking like that?” Max asked as soon as I entered the room.

I kept my nose up just as high as ever. “I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm off to my meeting.”

I lowered my nose enough to see Chase staring at me. As soon as I noticed him, he quickly looked down at his hands sitting in his lap. I looked away just as quickly. Totally not awkward.

“I'll walk you down,” Jason offered, turning my attention to him.

“You can't come in with me, remember?”

Jason smiled. “I'll wait for you outside the door.”

The appearance of the other vampires had made my already paranoid boyfriend even more so. I made myself smile and told myself that paranoia couldn't hurt, and it was probably warranted anyhow. Heck, maybe he wasn't paranoid at all, maybe he was just smarter than the rest of us.

I nodded and held out my hand to him. We left the room without another glance, but I could feel eyes on me as I left. It was probably Max, wondering why I was once again acting like a crazy person. You'd think he'd be used to it by now.

Fortunately today’s meeting was labeled as casual, so I’d dressed down in faded jeans, dark green v-neck t-shirt, and my trusty sneakers. I felt much more comfortable in my casual wear. Hard as I tried, dressing up made me feel embarrassed and weird. Plus, I like to be in shoes I can run away in. One should always be prepared to run away.

The meeting was being held in one of the small conference rooms that the inn boasted, down by the lobby. I left Jason outside the door with a quick kiss, then went in without knocking.

I was early (a rarity for me), and only a few of the seats were filled. I sat down at the small rectangular table in the small rectangular room. Across the table from me sat bear-man (who introduced himself as Mike) and a dark skinned woman that I guessed would be about 6’3” when she stood. Deep brown, dense curls foamed

around her face. She introduced herself as Darla.

Though Darla and Mike sat next to one-another, I sensed some major animosity going on. They each spoke to me, but had looks of utter distaste on their faces when they were not the one speaking.

“So you’re the demon,” Darla said to me conversationally, voice only expressing mild interest.

“Yep,” I shrugged. “That’s me.”

“You know you better watch your back around here,” she stated, absolutely no emotion in her voice.

“Is that a threat?” I asked casually.

She shrugged. “Not really. Just a fact.”

How could something ‘not really’ be a threat? I turned my attention from Darla as the rest of our group began to file into the room. Everyone avoided the seats directly next to me until Devin entered, sitting next to me and even scooting a little closer.

His vested interest in me had me even more worried than Darla’s non-threat. I glanced down at his arm on the table, *way* too close to mine, and scooted my arm a few more inches away. Devin didn't seem to notice. He was in all black again. He either needed a serious wardrobe makeover, or he was constantly monochrome for a reason. A sign of neutrality maybe? Though, for someone who was supposed to be neutral, he didn't resemble Switzerland in the slightest.

Abel entered last and stood at the head of the table. Greta, my new favorite werewolf, was nowhere to be seen. I guess Mike didn’t think she was needed. I was with Mike on this one.

No one spoke as Abel went to a coffee pot in the corner and poured himself a cup. I was told that this was a breakfast meeting, but they must have just meant that it occurred at breakfast time, because I didn’t see any food in sight. My stomach growled at the thought, and Devin turned to raise an eyebrow at me. No one else seemed to notice, but I was in a room full of werewolves, so I knew they all heard it.

Abel placed his coffee on the table without taking a single sip. He was dressed down today in a tight gray t-shirt and expensive looking jeans. His hair was loose and flowed long and thick, nearly to his waist. Having hair that long would drive my crazy. Knowing me, I'd probably slam it in car doors and strangle myself in my sleep.

Abel cleared his throat. “Today’s meeting,” he began, “has been called so that one, Alexondra Meyers, may state her need for the formation of a new pack. Her statement will be heard in full, then you will have an opportunity to question her. After that, the meeting will adjourn, and we will place the matter to a vote tonight.”

Apparently finished speaking, Abel sat and turned his gaze to me. His gaze was intense, like he was trying to prod me into action with the powers of his mind alone. When I didn’t do anything except sit

there and look nervous, he motioned with his hand for me to rise.

I stood hesitantly and cleared my throat. Please don't mess up, please don't mess up. "Um hi," I said, giving a feeble wave to the room. 'Um hi'? Great way to start Xoe. Werewolves responded to confidence and aggression, not meek nervousness.

I took a deep breath to gather my composure, and went on, "I'm here today to petition to form a pack-"

"Tell us something we don't know," a younger woman with hair and skin as pale as mine mumbled. I hadn't noticed her at the meeting the day before, but then again I had been a little too busy worrying about my own presentation to pay much attention to anyone else's.

At a simultaneous dirty look from me, Devin, and Abel, she promptly shut up. Darla covered her mouth with her hand to hide her silent laughter. It didn't help much, her amber eyes were shiny with amusement. At least someone was having a good time.

I stood a little straighter and tried to remember what Lela had told me to say. "The only wolves in my area have unanimously agreed to be part of my pack. My bid as Alpha has been approved by the coalition leader. Members of my soon-to-be pack stood witness to the event that qualified me as such."

"Murder doesn't make you Alpha," Mike interjected.

"But self-defense after a personal challenge does," Devin countered.

Mike opened his mouth to say more, but Abel interrupted him. "Questions and opinions will be held until after Alexondra's proposal."

I took a deep breath and went on. "I will live by werewolf law, though I am not a werewolf, and I will protect my pack with my life." The end, I thought to myself . . . hopefully it wasn't my end.

I sat without another word. There was a brief moment of silence, then everyone erupted into a mixture of excited and angry chatter. Darla just sat back and smiled. Either she cared little enough about what was happening to find it funny, or she knew something I didn't. I was betting on the latter.

Once Abel calmed the crowd, the questioning began, and oh, what a questioning it was. They basically just repeated that I wasn't a werewolf, that I was a murderer, and so on and so forth.

When the meeting finally ended, I let everyone leave before me. No need to get accosted in the hallway if I could help it.

"You did good," Devin observed, still sitting beside me.

"You don't stand a chance," Abel added, head in his hands.

We were the only three left in the room.

"We could just push it through without a vote," Devin suggested.

Abel shook his head. "It would be chaos."

"Not that I mind," I interrupted. "But why do you guys care?"

Abel stared at me for a long time, before finally speaking. “Our packs are vulnerable,” he explained. “Our most recent incident has shown us that.” The incident he was referring to was the killing of several werewolves by the same group that kidnapped and tried to kill me.

“If you are bound by werewolf law,” he explained, “it will give demons and other supernaturals pause before messing with any of our wolves. Everyone is made more wary where demons are involved. Demons live forever. That's a long time to run away from vengeance.”

“But I’m only a half-demon,” I countered. “I killed Dan by accident, and had to be rescued from my kidnappers by my dad. I'm going to have a normal human lifespan. No one is going to be scared of my vengeance.”

“But very few know any of that,” Devin explained. “The human lifespan maybe, but that's it. It’s the same principle that someone would use in burglarizing a home. One home has a big angry dog, one home does not. Which would you choose to rob?”

I was beginning to understand where they were coming from. We didn't have to be that scary, just scarier than the next group. “So, I’m your big angry dog?”

Abel nodded and smiled his perfect smile. “Exactly.”

I stood and shook my head. “I hope you two know what you’re doing.”

Abel turned to Devin. “Might I have a moment alone with Alexondra?”

Devin nodded and offered me his hand.

I looked at the hand suspiciously. “If you kiss my hand again I'm going to smack you.”

Devin smiled. “A simple handshake then?”

I smiled back and offered my hand. He shook it, a nice, proper handshake, then quickly left the room like a good little lackey.

As soon as the door shut I turned to face Abel.

He looked down then up at me again, nervous. Suspicious.

“As coalition leader, I would like to offer you my protection Alexondra.”

The wording made me laugh. Well maybe not the wording, but the phrase itself. It just seemed like something someone would say in a bad mobster flick.

I stifled myself mid-laugh. “Um, that's nice and all, but why?”

Abel looked down at the table. “We're asking a lot of you.”

I still wasn't getting it. “I thought protection was the whole point of giving me a pack. You pretty much offered me your protection with that offer.”

Abel shook his head. “Not my personal protection. Under pack law,

if someone kills you, we'll hunt them down and kill them. We have enforcers for that. What I'm offering you is different. If anyone challenges your dominance, they will in effect be challenging mine."

I snorted. "You're going to have a lot of challenges to your dominance then."

Abel wasn't smiling at all now. "Not as many as you might think. The only ones who challenge you are stupid. My protection will hold the stupid ones at bay. They've learned to be scared of me. They don't have enough experience to be scared of you, yet."

I shook my head. "I think you have the wrong impression of me. I'm really not that scary."

"How much do you know of your heritage?" he asked abruptly.

The sudden subject change threw me off. "My heritage?" I stammered.

"Demons have quite the history," he explained. "If more knew about that history, you would never have had a single challenger to begin with."

Now I was even more confused. Demons were relatively unknown, even in the supernatural community. Few knew what we could do, especially since our powers varied so greatly. It made us wild cards. Some of the cards would only give you a paper cut, and others would mush you to a pulp. It was an intimidating concept, but it wasn't exactly a history.

My stomach growled again.

Abel took a deep breath. "I'm getting off topic. The point is, I'm offering you my protection. Do you accept?"

"Oh no you don't," I replied. "What's this history you're talking about."

He smiled. "Have your father explain it to you sometime. Do you accept?"

I squinted at him suspiciously. "What does accepting entail?"

"Nothing," he replied, "except that you acknowledge my dominance, and my right to protect you."

I did *not* like the sound of that. "Your *right*? That sounds like I'd be your property."

Abel shrugged. "Only as far as public perception is concerned. You would not in truth be mine. Usually protection is only offered to a spouse or a child."

I blinked slowly, completely taken aback and not sure what to think. I was pretty sure he wasn't asking me to be his spouse, because ew, but there was the possibility that he was asking me to pretend to be his spouse.

"I don't think so," I replied sharply.

Abel just sat silently for a moment and regarded me. "It would

help protect your friends . . . " he began.

I cocked my head in question. "In what way?"

Abel smiled. He knew he had me as soon as he mentioned my friends, damn it. "If you're mine, and they're yours, to mess with one would be to mess with all."

"So I pretend to be *yours*, and we'll stop getting picked on?" I asked.

Abel smiled again, the smug bastard. "Yes."

"Fine." I stood.

Abel stood and put his hand on the back of my chair to bar my way. "So you agree?"

I glared up at him. "I said *fine*, didn't I?"

Abel grinned from ear to ear. "We'll make the announcement tonight."

With that, I left the room to meet Jason in the hallway, leaving Abel alone to grin over his victory. I had a feeling there was more to this protection ownership than Abel was saying. All I had agreed to was being *his* in name only, but the thought still rankled. A demon's pride and all of that.

"How'd it go?" Jason asked anxiously as soon as he saw me. The fact that he had to ask at all meant someone had prevented him from standing anywhere near the door.

I kept walking and he fell into stride beside me. I shrugged. "I'm a big angry dog, and everyone wants to rob us, and I belong to an egocentric werewolf."

"Am I supposed to know what that means?" he asked.

"No," I answered and kept walking.

"What do you mean *belong*?" he asked trailing behind me.

"I'm not really sure," I replied morosely.

Jason grabbed my arm. He looked pissed. "What do you mean *belong,* Xoe?"

I shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. "It would be for the public eye only. If everyone else thinks I belong to him, they're going to back off."

I could feel tears welling behind my eyes and I didn't know why. I'm not much of a crier, but I had a feeling that I was overwhelmed just enough for it to happen.

"Ok," he responded, like he was trying to calm a spooked horse. "Then explain the big angry dog."

I couldn't bring myself to answer. The tears started to spill over. I'd been compared to a female dog a time or two, but never to a guard dog. Just call me Cujo.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Instead of going straight back to the room, Jason accompanied me to the lobby for the complimentary breakfast, which was luckily still going on. I didn't really feel hungry anymore, but I needed a distraction, so I busied myself with the nifty waffle maker that was set out on the counter, while Jason snagged us a table.

Plate piled high with food and coffee in hand, I sat down across from Jason, who sat with only a cup of coffee. I raised an eyebrow at him.

“I ate earlier,” he explained.

Okay, I had to ask. “Um . . . what about your other hunger?”

Jason cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I took care of that earlier as well.”

I wasn't sure when he would have had the chance, probably in the early morning hours while I was still asleep. I briefly wondered if he had been out hunting with werewolves . . . or other vampires, but I didn’t question him further.

Thinking of Jason sucking the blood from Thumper or Bambi gave me the serious creeps, thinking of it as a group activity was just a little too much for me. I’d like to say it didn’t give me occasional doubts, but it totally did. I tried to compare it to eating a hamburger, but it still didn’t sit right.

Lucy, Allison, and Lela entered the lobby together. Lucy was the first to sit down, bagel and a cup of apple juice in hand. She took a sip of juice then turned to face me. “What on earth were you going on about this morning?” she asked.

Jason raised his eyebrows curiously.

“I forgot my clothes in the other room,” I mumbled.

Lucy raised her hands in a ‘so what?’ gesture. “And? You had a towel.”

“Geez, no one understands a little modesty these days,” I replied sarcastically.

Lucy looked at me skeptically. “Since when are you modest?”

I was beginning to blush again. “I need more coffee,” I stated. I jumped up and quickly hurried over to the coffee pot.

When I eventually returned to the table, Allison and Lela had

seated themselves as well. The table was a little cramped with five chairs, but I managed to wiggle my way back into my seat. No one else mentioned my morning escapades.

Jason caught my eye as I sipped my coffee. I smiled reassuringly at him. That seemed to be enough, as he rejoined the girls' discussion on what to do today. There were a few optional scheduled activities, but I for one had had quite enough of the other werewolves for the day.

Lucy, who had been leafing through a small local newspaper, turned her attention back to the table. "There's a local art fair going on," she announced. "We could go check it out."

I shrugged. "Sounds good to me." I turned to regard Jason. I already knew he would come, but it's always polite to ask.

Jason smiled. "If we must," he conceded.

"Oh," Lucy cut in, "How did the meeting go?"

Well there it was, I had managed to block it out of my head for a full five minutes. "We'll talk about it later," I mumbled.

Lucy stared at me for a heartbeat and must have seen something in my expression, because she changed the subject back to the art fair. "So we'll gather our stuff and go once we finish eating?"

I smiled in relief and nodded. "Yeah, we'll grab our stuff and see if Max or Chase want to come."

Lucy smiled a little bigger at the mention of Chase and I cringed. Really, I should be trying to set the two of them up. I *would* try and set them up. They were both my friends. If they could be happy together, then they should.

In the end, Allison, Lela, and Max opted for the werewolf agenda. So, it was just me, Lucy, Jason, and Chase that left the inn in the giant SUV. I got to drive, and Lucy instantly called shotgun, leaving the boys to sit in the back.

I could tell Lucy was hoping this would turn into a double date type of scenario as she sat in the passenger seat with a serene smile on her face. I strengthened my resolve to not be jealous, and just the fact that I had to do that made me feel incredibly guilty.

We pulled up to the large, grassy park where the art market was set up, but there wasn't a single empty parking space in the area. We drove in circles for a few minutes before giving up and parking on a residential street a few blocks away.

We got out of the SUV and started walking with Chase in the lead, then me and Lucy, and Jason brought up the rear. I playfully shoved Lucy forward to walk next to Chase and fell back a few steps to walk with Jason. I twined my fingers around his, and for the first time that morning started to actually enjoy myself.

The art market was slightly more interesting than the clothes shopping Allison usually conned me into. The vendors ranged from

traditional paintings and crafts, to natural products and vegan food. The food was donation only. If you could afford it, you added money to a jar on the counter, if not, you still got a plate. Everyone got to eat.

Chase wandered off to a booth filled with colorful metalworks, while I browsed some landscapes with Jason and Lucy. I gave Jason's hand a squeeze to get his attention. When he looked down I gestured that I was going to step away for a second and pulled my hand out of his. He looked skeptical as I went off in the direction Chase had gone, but smiled back when I smiled reassuringly at him with a wink.

I walked up to casually stand by Chase's side. “So,” I began. “You're single, right?”

Chase turned his attention from a large metal scorpion to regard me. “Yes?” he replied like it was a question.

I nodded and looked down, feeling awkward. I fondled a small metal frog and considered getting it for my mom.

“You know, Lucy is single too,” I went on.

Chase turned his gaze back to the table, but still asked, “So what's your point?”

“No point,” I shrugged, heart racing. At that moment I was very glad that Chase was a demon and not a werewolf, and therefore probably couldn't hear my heart racing . . . probably.

“Let's join the others,” Chase suggested, changing the subject awkwardly. “Jason looks bored already,” he added.

I turned in the direction Chase was looking to see Jason pretending that he wasn't watching us. I walked back to Jason without another word with Chase following close behind me.

I put my hand back in Jason's when we reached him and he looked down at me in question. I shrugged and frowned in return. I'd explain it to him later.

Lucy and I took to browsing the booths as the boys took a seat at a picnic table to wait on us. Lucy was instantly drawn to a table supplying handcrafted herbal soaps and lotions. I followed her, more interested in just having some girl time than I was in the soaps.

As Lucy sniffed the random bricks, a small section of lavender scented goods caught my attention. I love lavender. They even had lavender scented shampoo and conditioner.

Since I hadn’t brought any of my own, and didn’t want to keep using up the mystery shampoo I’d used that morning, I went ahead and grabbed some. I handed the bottles and my money to the elderly woman manning the booth, and she packaged them up in a cute little paper bag with dried herbs attached to one of the handles.

Lucy didn’t end up buying anything from the stand. She looked at my bag and I shrugged, then we headed towards the next booth that

sported scarves and purses.

"So what were you and Chase talking about?" she questioned.

"You," I replied with a playful smile.

"You *didn't*," she squealed as she punched me in the arm.

I grabbed at the sudden throbbing pain in my arm and scowled at Lucy. Sometimes she forgets that she's a werewolf now, and her punches hurt a lot more than they used to.

Her hand fluttered up to her face in realization. "Sorry Xoe!" she exclaimed. "I'm still not used to being stronger."

I nodded and we started walking again.

"So what did he say when you talked to him?" she questioned nervously.

"Um," I began.

"Well this already doesn't sound good," she interrupted.

"Well," I began again, "he just seemed uncomfortable talking about it to me."

"Allison must be right then," Lucy replied sullenly.

I grabbed her arm to stop her mid-stride. "Wait. What?"

Lucy scrunched her eyebrows at me. "She said she already told you."

I shook my head. I had a feeling I already knew, but I asked anyway. "Told me what?"

Lucy looked at me like I was being stupid. "Chase is in love with you. I was skeptical at first, but now I'm pretty sure Al is right. She said she told you."

I shook my head. She had told me, but I had been nursing my wounds in a hot bath, half delirious from being held hostage and beaten and bruised. I hadn't taken the conversation seriously, as we'd all been through a lot, and Allison had just needed something else to focus on.

"He's not in love with me," I mumbled.

Lucy looked at me like I was a misbehaving child. "I know you've noticed Xoe, even if you don't want to admit it."

I shrugged and couldn't quite meet her eyes. "I know he cares about me, a little, but he's not in love with me."

"He looks at you the exact same way Jason looks at you," she replied bluntly.

"Well he needs to stop," I replied.

Lucy raised an eyebrow at me again. "So you don't feel anything for him, anything at all?"

I once again couldn't meet her eyes. "I don't know."

"Oh Xoe," Lucy consoled, annunciating her words slowly. "What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "Nothing I guess. I'll just ignore it and hope it goes

away."

Lucy stared at me, waiting for me to say more, but I didn't know what else to say.

I looked down and started walking toward the booth again. I had *so* not been prepared to talk about this, and I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Maybe later. No, on second thought, how about never? I'd be just fine with never talking about it.

Lucy seemed to have decided to let it go for now as we walked. We didn't quite make it to the booth, which was no big loss in my mind, but I wasn't too thrilled with what stopped us.

"She doesn't look so powerful," A petite, yet curvy woman noted, looking me up and down. Her dark, curly hair was styled to perfection, not an spot of frizz in sight. A small smile played across her cupid's-bow mouth. "I don't see what they're all so worried about."

She stood in front of us, flanked by two average sized men, one that looked to be somewhere in his thirties, and the other looking maybe eighteen.

I knew that none of them were the ages they looked. These were the vampires Jason had met with last night. I hadn't seen their faces, but somehow I just knew. Maybe my supernatural radar was getting better.

A low growl trickled from Lucy's throat. I tried to hide my surprise at the sound. Apparently Lucy could tell what they were too. She probably smelled them.

"Now now," the younger looking man soothed in a cultured English accent. "We mean you no harm . . . today."

The young guy's dark hair was cropped close to his scalp, making his big blue eyes look even bigger. He'd look like a baby forever. Had to suck. I might have even felt bad for him if he and his friends weren't trying so hard to intimidate us.

Suddenly Jason was at my side, and Chase was beside Lucy. "We agreed you'd leave her alone Maggie," Jason practically growled, his eyes on the woman in front of us.

"No," Maggie corrected, good cheer dripping from her words. "We agreed that I would not kill her just yet."

"A little sure of ourselves, aren't we?" I chimed in, feeling more than a little peeved.

Every little ounce of good cheer leaked from Maggie's small round face, as if it had never been there at all. "No one was asking for your opinion little one."

Little one? I had to be at least five inches taller than her. "Listen shortstack," I replied. "You want to mess with me, you do it directly and to my face. If you haven't got the guts, then be on your merry

way."

"Xoe," Jason scolded sharply.

I felt heat coursing through my veins. It probably wasn't smart to mess with a pack of vampires, but my temper had to come out one way or another. In this case, words were better than actions.

Maggie laughed, not realizing what could happen if I lost my temper. "Jason dear, you better keep your dog on a leash . . . and I'm not referring to the werewolf."

Maggie turned her attention from me and walked a few steps to stand in front of Jason. She put a hand seductively on his chest. "I had almost forgotten how nice you are on the eyes Jason dear. I'm not quite sure what you're doing with *this* one." she remarked, gesturing at me with her eyes.

Jason grabbed Maggie's wrist and looked at her with an unexpected amount of hatred. I had never seen a look like that on Jason's face before. That look let me know that there was *a lot* of history between him and Maggie, and most of it was bad.

Maggie ignored Jason's hand on her wrist and placed her free hand on his chest as well. She leaned her body in towards his, but she wasn't looking at him, she was looking at me.

That did it. My mom had always told me to be the bigger person in these types of situations. People could only get to you if you let them. Well, obviously I was letting Maggie because I felt a hot wash of rage pour across me.

Jason, predicting what was going to happen, turned to try and grab me, but it was too late. I had a split second to think better of things and tried to turn my anger away from Maggie, but with power coursing in, all sense left me.

My vision went completely red. I could no longer feel the sun on my face or the gentle breeze. Faintly I heard Jason talking to me in a soothing voice to calm me down. Next thing I knew, I *was* calm. I was calm, and Maggie's dress was on fire.

One second she was there with a mixture of shock and hatred on her face, the next she was simply gone, running to put out the fire most likely. Some of the people around us gave us strange looks. They might have caught a glimpse of fire, but Maggie was gone too fast to cause much alarm. They were probably wondering less about fire, and more about the woman that just disappeared into thin air, leaving a faint burning scent in her wake.

Maggie's cronies gave me identical looks of amusement, and maybe a little bit of respect.

"You're very likely going to regret that," the young looking one said.

I shrugged. "You have no idea how often I hear that."

With that, they both ran off after Maggie.

“Xoe!” Jason snapped. “You have no idea what it took me to ensure your safety from her. Now you’ve gone and put all of us in jeopardy.”

I sighed, feeling my last bits of anger leaking away. “I’m used to jeopardy,” I replied. “Jeopardy I can handle, but I’m not going to stand around and be talked down to by some random idiot, vampire or not.”

Jason stared at me, shocked by my attitude or my actions, I didn’t know. Probably both. Lucy had a similarly stunned expression on her face.

Chase grinned from ear to ear. At least someone found me amusing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The car ride back was just as much fun as the art market. That's some more sarcasm there, if you didn't catch it.

Jason drove, I sat in the passenger seat, Lucy and Chase both sat in the back. The tension was palpable. Lucy and Chase were both being quiet. This argument was for Jason and I alone apparently.

“We need to go home,” Jason muttered, finally breaking the silence.

I stared at him a moment before answering. His jaw was set in a tight line, holding back a lot more emotion than he was showing. His fists were clenched on the steering wheel at ten and two. I knew he was only angry because he was worried, so I avoided my normal grumpy approach.

“We can't leave, we came here for a reason.”

Jason didn't respond, but Lucy did. “We can leave Xoe. Forming a pack isn't worth risking our lives.”

I sank down in my seat sullenly. “Who said anything about risking lives?”

Jason risked a glance at me to see if I was serious. I pointed out to the road to signal he should watch what he was doing. His reflexes were good enough that he could probably divide his attention without a hitch, but I didn't really want his attention on me at the moment.

“We risked our lives the moment we set foot in Utah,” Jason began. “We knew you'd be challenged, we just assumed it would be by werewolves. Now not only do half of them want you dead, but Maggie does too.”

I could pretend I wasn't afraid all I wanted. Heck, most the time it even worked. I have the uncanny ability to ignore fear until I actually believe that it isn't there. Though all it takes for me to be reminded is someone I trust telling me I'm acting like a crazy person. Jason knew all of this, and now it was his turn to bring me back to reality. We were armpit deep in alligators, and most of it was my fault. Now everyone wanted to give up and go home.

If we went back home, we'd continue to be in danger. At least being part of the werewolf community would add a certain threat to messing with us. It's one thing to take on something scary, knowing

that if you kill it, nothing is going to come back to bite you. It's quite another thing to know that taking out the scary thing will only lead to the rest of the scary things coming after you. Yeah, we needed the pack. I'd rather risk our lives now, then have to look over our shoulders for the rest of them.

“We can't leave,” I announced.

“Xoe-” Jason began to argue.

I raised my hand. “No. I know I've screwed us five hundred ways to Sunday, but it doesn't change why we're here. We have to risk it if we ever want to feel safe.”

No one responded. That was agreement enough for me. We could all argue later, it didn't change the fact that we were staying, or at least I was.

We pulled up to the inn and parked. As we walked towards the entrance Jason stopped me.

“We'll be up in a minute,” he announced.

Lucy and Chase hesitated, but at a nod from me, they walked away.

Jason grabbed my other arm and turned me to face him. He stared at me until I gave him direct eye contact. My heart felt like it was trying to beat its way out through my throat. He was leaving. I knew it. I'd put him through too much, and he'd finally had enough.

He pulled me into a sudden and tight hug. “I can't have anything happen to you. You don't need to be part of this,” he whispered into my hair.

I pulled away from him and held him at arm's length. “Come again?”

He pulled me closer, so he could whisper and I'd still hear him. “Your friends will understand. Lucy, Max, and Lela can all find packs here. They'd need to move to other areas, but they would be safe.”

I shook my head. “Even if I were willing to leave them, I'm better off with a pack too.”

He touched the side of my face gently. “Why do you think that?”

I met his earnest blue eyes with as much weight as I could put in my gaze. He looked so worried. He just wanted to protect me and I wasn't letting him. I *couldn't* let him.

“You don't get it,” I explained. “I'm a rarity. You said it yourself, vampires would want to kill me just to taste my blood. Werewolves want to kill me because I'm a threat. We found out the hard way that witches want to kill me to see if they can steal part of what I am. I don't have a pack of demons to run to. If I don't do this, I'm alone.”

Jason shook his head. “You're not alone. I've been by myself for decades. We could leave together. I'll take care of you. No one can hunt you down, if no one can find us.”

“And when I get old, and you don't, and you leave me,” I muttered. “I'll be all alone. What will I do then? Make new ties and start looking over my shoulder again?”

Jason looked completely taken aback. “That's what you think?” he asked.

I shrugged and looked down. “That's what's logical.”

Jason put a hand under my chin and forced me to meet his eyes again. “You do realize, you might not even be mortal?”

I smiled bitterly. There was a small chance that I wasn't mortal, but I didn't really want it. I wanted to live and die with my friends and family. My dad was hoping for the small chance. He'll live forever if no one kills him. He doesn't want to watch his daughter die. Demons with a decent amount of human blood are pretty much a toss-up. Some of us aged and died like humans, some didn't

Really, I'd probably get killed off before I found out either way, so I hadn't put too much worry into it since I found out about that little chance.

“I probably am mortal,” I argued. “And it doesn't matter anyways. I'm not abandoning everyone.”

I tried to walk away, but Jason pulled me back. “You're still not listening Xoe. By taking this route, you're putting all of them in more danger than they have to be. They're in danger because they're associated with you.”

That stopped me cold. I hadn't thought of it like that. I was the freak of the bunch. As far as the entirety of the supernatural community was concerned, werewolves were a dime a dozen. I made us stand out. Standing out was not a good thing. He was right. Damn him, he was right.

I felt the realization slip across my face. “What will I tell them?” I asked.

Jason's mouth was set into a grim line. “The truth. I will never leave you Xoe. It's going to be okay.”

Chase chose that moment to come trotting back outside. His pace slowed as he saw our expressions. Jason's arms dropped and I pulled my arms in to hug myself. For the first time in months, I felt cold.

Chase took one look at me and turned to Jason. “What did you say to her?” he demanded.

Jason glared back at Chase. “She needed to understand. It's her decision to make.”

Chase stood closer to Jason, eye to eye. “The choice to run away?” he asked coldly.

“It would keep her safe,” Jason argued.

“It's *her* choice Jason,” Chase said sternly. “It doesn't matter what we think of it, or what we'd have her do differently.”

This had obviously been discussed beforehand without me. I wedged myself in between the two boys, facing Chase.

“I can't put everyone in danger anymore,” I explained.

Chase looked down at me coldly. “They're in danger anyhow. You know I was against this plan, but you were right at the start. It could save everyone. They want you saved too Xoe.”

“Wait,” I started. “Has *everyone* discussed this without me?”

Chase took a moment to read my face before he answered. “Everyone agrees that this is the best thing. You're not the only one that gets to do the protecting Xoe. Your friends want to protect you too.”

I hadn't considered that everyone else would be trying to protect me too. It wasn't just me taking care of everyone.

I had a thought. “So does Abel.”

Jason walked around me so he could see my face as well. “What?” he asked.

I smiled. “Abel offered me his protection. Technically I think that means he has to help with the vampire problem.”

“What are you talking about?” Chase asked.

“Abel offered me his protection earlier, and I accepted,” I explained. “The vampires aren't just going up against me, they're going up against Abel, and in effect, everyone he leads.”

“But what difference does that make?” Chase prodded. “Maggie could slip in and try to kill you and run before any help would come.”

I shook my head. “It's going to be a little difficult for her with werewolves hunting her down.”

Jason looked hopeful. “Do you believe Abel would do that?”

I shrugged. “He wants this to work. He won't hunt her down himself, but I'll bet you anything I hold dear that he'll order others to. Maggie might think twice when she sees that messing with us means being hunted by the masses.”

Chase smiled. Jason smiled. Why protect each other, when someone else would do it all for us?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When we got back to the hotel room, Allison, Lela, and Max were still out doing werewolf activities, and my dad was waiting for us.

At the raised eyebrow he gave me as I entered the bedroom, I simply shrugged.

“Did you really have to light the vampire on fire?” He questioned.

“She had it coming,” I mumbled in response, surprised that he already knew.

My dad chuckled, shoving his blond hair out of his face that eerily resembled mine. “We’ve been working on your control for just this reason,” he lectured. “Have you been doing your exercises?”

My dad had taught me meditations to calm myself down when I was about to lose it. He made me practice them all the time, claiming that once they were like second nature to me, I’d do them automatically, and therefore wouldn’t lose control anymore.

“I’ve been a bit busy,” I replied.

Ignoring me, my dad turned his attention to Chase, who was still standing behind me near the door. “Chase?” my dad questioned. “Please make sure that she runs through her exercises every day.”

Chase sat in on most of my lessons, even though his demon powers were nothing like mine. He just seemed to enjoy watching for some reason.

Chase grimaced. “I’ll try.”

My dad raised his hand and I knew he was about to puff out on us. “Wait!” I exclaimed.

He lowered his hand back down.

“I have two questions. First, Abel mentioned something about me not really knowing my demon history. Second, Abel offered me his protection, and I don't really know what that fully entails.”

My dad raised his eyebrows again. “First Alexondra, neither of those are actual questions. Second, I am surprised at Abel's offer, but it could be highly advantageous if you're willing to swallow a little bit of pride.”

I smiled. “Well I already swallowed it and accepted, so tell me my advantages.”

My dad smiled back, his mouth a perfect mirror of my own. It

really is freaky how many physical similarities we have.

"Well," he explained. "The first advantage goes to me. I was going to arrange you some extra protection, but now Abel will obliged to do so instead. The rest of the advantages go to you. Once you publicly announce his *ownership* over you, anything that happens to you will be perceived as his fault. If you are hurt, it will be seen as the fault of his weaknesses, and not yours. A leader does not want to appear weak."

"So," I began, trying to put things together in my head. "I really gain a lot from this, and he stands to lose a lot. So why would he even offer?"

My dad sat back down on the bed to explain. "One reason could be that it will greatly improve your chances of forming a pack. If the other wolves see you cowed to their leader, they will not view you as such a threat. You will become a controlled element. Still, it is a big risk for him to take, which means he wants you under werewolf law very badly."

I shrugged. "He told me he wants demons linked to his faction of wolves so that they'll be scarier than the other factions. People are made more wary where demons are involved."

My dad steepled his fingers together in thought. "A very good point Xoe. So either he is a very good leader, risking a great deal for the continued safety of his people, or . . . "

"Or . . . " I prompted.

"Or he wants something else," he finished.

My dad shrugged gracefully. "I will do my best to find out, but the point is, you've already agreed. The wheels are already in motion, so we must simply make the best of the situation."

With that, my dad snapped his fingers, and was gone with a whoosh of fire and a poof of smoke. I realized he hadn't answered my question about demon history. I was willing to bet that he hadn't forgotten that I'd asked.

Chase moseyed a little closer to me. "Shall we?" he said with a sweep of his arm.

I eyed him suspiciously.

Chase raised his hands in an *I mean no harm* gesture. "Lessons? I just got a pretty good scolding for your lack of studying motivation."

"Right now?" I groaned, then looked at Jason for help.

Jason shrugged, he looked like he was thinking way too hard about way too many things. "I'd say you need all the practice you can get."

I gave my loving boyfriend what I imagined to be a truly terrifying glare.

Jason smiled in response. "Am I wrong?"

No, he was not wrong. I held onto my glare though. I turned to go

into the other room with Chase when a motion from Jason stopped me. I signaled for Chase to go on and walked back to regard Jason.

Jason looked down with a dark look on his face. “I’ve known Maggie for a very long time,” he admitted.

“And?” I questioned, not seeing the point.

Jason sat on the bed and pulled me down to sit next to him.

“I met Maggie shortly after I was turned,” he began. I was instantly nervous. Jason never talked about his past. “We were together for a long time,” he went on.

I raised my eyebrows. “Like, *together*?” I questioned, feeling a little shocked.

I mean, I’d guessed Jason had had a past, but I’d never tried to learn too much about that particular aspect. Just because he was my first real boyfriend, didn’t mean that I was his first girlfriend. I felt sick, and I hated that I felt it. Past was past. Yeah, tell that to the little pit of rage boiling in the bottom of my stomach.

“Yes together,” he admitted. “But I didn’t love her, like I love you,” he added quickly.

Isn’t that what all boys say about their past relationships to their current one? You’re different, special. I choked back bile. My reaction was so stupid. This was years, and I mean *years* ago. We’re talking double digits here.

When I didn’t speak, Jason continued, “She was old back then, I’m not sure how old, she would never tell me. She’s much stronger than me.”

I stood to make my way to the adjoining room. I didn't need to hear all of this.

“Xoe?” Jason questioned from behind me.

I turned partially to face him. “I’m not mad,” I assured. “I just need to . . . process.”

I waited long enough to see his nod, then quickly shut myself inside the girls’ room. Chase and Lucy were sitting at the foot of Lucy’s bed looking at the rest of the schedule of events.

Chase raised his eyes to me. “Everything okay?”

I nodded somberly and sat on the other side of Lucy. “I take it you heard?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Sorry Xoe.”

I shrugged and turned to Chase. “Still up for running through my lesson with me?”

Chase hesitated. “So we *are* staying then, right? We're going to see this pack thing through?”

Lucy perked up at that before I could answer. “But Xoe,” she began

I patted my hands at the air in a calming gesture. “There will be no more discussion Lucy, we're staying. Which reminds me, we need to

get a message to Abel."

"After the lesson," Chase interrupted. "I don't need another lecture."

I glared at him. I'm not a big fan of my lessons. They're not bad, just boring.

"Fine," I replied crankily, eliciting a relieved smile from Chase.

Lucy sat awkwardly between us for a moment, then asked, "Can I watch?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

Chase and I moved to sit cross-legged on the floor, facing each other with our knees almost touching. It was usually me and my dad sitting this way while Chase sat off to the side.

It didn't surprise me when he started running through the lesson exactly as my dad did . . . he'd sat in on enough of them.

"Hold out your hands," Chase instructed.

I held both my hands out, palms up. Chase placed his hand palm down on my right hand. His hand was dry and slightly cooler than mine. He nodded at me, signaling that I should make a flame in my free hand. Having someone touch one hand helped me concentrate on making a singular flame in my other hand, don't ask me why. I guess instinctively I tried not to burn them, even though Chase wouldn't get burned anyhow. I could still light his clothes on fire though.

I closed my eyes and focused. I could sense Lucy sitting quietly on the bed. I focused on my free palm. I felt the surge of energy I always feel before I make a flame. I kept my eyes closed for a minute, focusing on sustaining it.

"Um Xoe . . . " Chase began.

Sensing the worry in his voice, I opened my eyes. I had made a flame like I was supposed to, but it was . . . huge. It was also a deep crimson color, as opposed to my usually natural orange flames. I stared at the flame in shock. It was incredibly freaky . . . yet beautiful. I'd never seen fire that color.

I took my free hand away from Chase. The stone on my ring was swirling with seemingly violent, unnatural lights. "You see it this time?" I asked Chase, holding my ring out for him to see.

"Uh huh," he observed nervously.

I for some reason wasn't nervous. I felt calm, if slightly awe-struck. I closed my hand that held the fire and it disappeared. There was no smoke in its wake like there usually was.

Lucy came to kneel beside me. "I take it that's not what usually happens?"

Suddenly a crash came from next door. We all instinctively bolted toward the other room. Lucy was the first to make it there, throwing the door open wide before rushing inside.

The vampires were back, and they'd brought friends. Maggie had a new dress, pastel pink with little flowers on it . . . ick.

"There you are," she observed upon seeing me.

Jason was being held back by her cronies that we'd met earlier, while an elderly woman with pure gray hair and another woman that looked eerily like Maggie stood watch. The Maggie doppelganger was in the exact same dress as Maggie, only in baby blue. Double ick.

"Maggie no!" Jason shouted and kicked out at his captors as she rushed me.

Lucy side-tackled her before she could reach me. Maggie threw Lucy against the wall like she weighed nothing. Maggie pinned Lucy with her hand on her throat. I watched in shock as Lucy started sputtering for breath, her hands clawing at Maggie's around her neck.

In unison, Chase and I grabbed Maggie and ripped her off of Lucy. Before I could see if Lucy was breathing Maggie turned on me and threw me to the ground, face contorted with rage. She looked nothing like the cute, petite woman I had seen earlier. She got a grip on my throat much like she had with Lucy, except she was straddling me to help pin me down.

Chase was there, about to pull her off of me, until he disappeared in a blur of motion with the Maggie look-alike on top of him.

My vision was going gray. I couldn't remember how to fight back. I felt something with my left hand as I flailed my arms feebly. I wrapped my fingers around the rooms' big heavy bible. I didn't know who had taken it out of the drawer but I was grateful. With a quick muddled thought that this was strangely ironic in some way, I swung the bible up to make a sickening crunch against Maggie's nose.

She fell back, losing her grip on my throat and Jason was suddenly there. He grabbed Maggie by her torso and threw her into the wall like she weighed nothing. The wall shook with her impact.

My senses started to come back to show me chaos all around me. The wolves in the other rooms had to hear it, but no one came running to our rescue. Maggie came rushing back towards me, blood dripping steadily from her nose. I scrambled backwards to get out of her reach, but she was on me in seconds. She was faster than Jason, faster than anything I was yet to deal with.

I shoved my palm into her nose, making the blood flow more heavily, as she grabbed at my waist and dragged me under her. She managed to pin my wrists, hard enough that it felt like my bones might break. Her grip felt like an iron vice. She put her face right above mine and smiled.

The blood from her nose dripped near my mouth and into my nose. I sputtered as I kicked my legs to try and buck her off, but it wasn't working. I could hear struggles all around me, but everyone else was

out of my line of vision. I tried to concentrate and form the same fire I had formed only moments before, but nothing was happening. My powers work with anger, not fear.

There was a giant thud at the door, and Maggie paused to look in that direction. A moment of silence and another thud sounded. One more thud and the door splintered and swung violently inward to slam against the wall. Abel stood framed in the doorway for a moment, then he was just a blur of motion running towards Maggie.

Abel full on jump tackled her and they flew into Jason and the elderly woman, who had obviously been struggling with each other.

Maggie slipped Abel's grip and regained her footing to face him, but then something drew her attention to the other end of the room. With a blood-curdling scream she rushed towards Chase, who was crouched beside an unmoving Maggie doppelganger.

I didn't have time to wonder at the power suddenly flowing through me. Rather than forming fire in my palm, I closed my hands and focused on Maggie. Like magic, Maggie was on fire for the second time today. Except now I wasn't just being pissy. She was going after Chase with some serious intent. She'd just tried to strangle me. The calm realization came over me that I wanted her dead.

People always seem to think that they could never wish death on another person, but let those people watch the lives of their loved ones at risk. Let them come to the horrifying realization that someone they care about is about to die right there in front of them. Let them feel that perfect cool rage at those realizations, then ask them again if they're capable of wishing someone dead.

The acrid smell of burning flesh filled the room, then diminished as Maggie leapt right through the window, already shattered from the vampires' entrance. She wouldn't die. She was a vampire, a super old one. She'd heal surface burns in a matter of hours. Too bad.

I turned around just as Abel snapped the elderly woman's neck. I shuddered and wished I hadn't turned around so soon. Abel gave me a look of what seemed like respect. I was getting that look a lot lately. Apparently supernatural beasties only respected you when you punched them or lit them on fire, though I highly doubt Maggie's emotions at the moment ran anything near respect.

Maggie's other two cronies had bolted. Some friends they were. I wasn't sure when they had left, probably when they realized that we were putting up more of a fight then they thought us capable of.

Lucy was blinking and looked confused, like she had just regained consciousness. Despite the bruises forming on her throat she seemed okay. Jason was mostly unharmed, fancy that. Either vampires didn't like to hurt their own, or Maggie still had a soft spot for Jason after all of these years and had ordered him unharmed. I was betting on the

second.

I went to crouch by Chase, who was still crouched by Maggie number two. His shoulder was bleeding. It looked like the woman had bitten him and torn a chunk of flesh away. His shirt was torn and very, very bloody. Blood was dripping down to stain the carpet.

I reached out as if to touch the wound, but let my hand fall before I could complete the action. Chase met my eyes, pain showing clearly on his face. “It’s fine,” he said shakily.

With wonderfully numbing shock coming over me, I looked down to who I had to guess was Maggie’s twin sister. Well she had been her sister. Crap, sisters made into vampires? She had two perfect little puncture marks on the side of her neck. Dark yellow and green lines flowed under her skin, radiating from the bite and mottling the color of her otherwise pristine neck.

I turned back to Chase and he smiled feebly. I smiled back, don’t ask me why. Chase is part Naga. He’s poisonous. I’d forgotten that little tidbit. I don’t think I’ll forget again.

“Can you stand?” I asked him.

He started to nod, but then stopped with a wince of pain. He was a demon, he’d heal, but it still hurt.

I grabbed his hand and helped him stand. Jason and Lucy were both staring at us. Jason had a tortured look on his face, blaming himself for everything, as he often did.

Lucy looked pale despite her olive skin. She turned to go to the door, mumbling something about getting away from this mess, but I stopped her with a hand on her arm. I highly doubted that Maggie was waiting outside, but Lucy had been stolen from us once before, I wasn't about to risk it happening again.

Lucy stared at my hand like it was something foreign, and I withdrew it slowly. I looked down at my hand wondering if there was something wrong with it.

“How are you calm right now?” she asked.

I shrugged. Surprisingly I did feel calm. You could only suffer through so much action before you started to compartmentalize. I found myself wondering if it would all just suddenly catch up with me eventually.

Lucy shook her head. “The look on your face Xoe, you wanted to kill her. He,” she pointed at Chase, “killed that woman. She's on the floor dead right now. Does it not register with you that there are bodies on the floor?”

I guess Lucy had been conscious for more of the fight than I'd thought.

“Lucy,” Jason began, trying to stop the coming argument.

I shook my head and held up a hand for him to stop. “She tried to

kill you. She would have hurt Chase."

Lucy squinted like she didn't understand, then shouted, "No one needed to die!"

"*We* would have died!" I shouted back, frustrated. "What part of that do you not get, Lucy?"

Jason finally cut in at that point. He came to stand in between me and Lucy. Chase just stayed leaning against the wall, bleeding and unsure of what to do.

I looked up into Jason's pain filled face. He didn't try to blame me for being ready to kill Maggie, or for the death of her sister. He just stood there looking miserable.

I tried to smile at Jason reassuringly, and he managed to force his mouth into a small smile back. Had he cared for Maggie's twin? He'd been with Maggie for years, so he obviously knew her. It was all a bit too much for me to deal with at the moment.

I stepped around Jason and Lucy, and led Chase toward the bathroom to clean his wound. I spared a glance at Abel. The elderly woman was crumpled at his feet, but he didn't seem to care. I shook my head and kept walking.

I left the door open behind us and made Chase sit down against the edge of the sink. Without a word, I grabbed the bloody fabric of his shirt and finished the tear that had been started there. I ripped the shirt completely off of his arm so I could lift it over the rest of his body with him only having to move his good shoulder.

At a loss as to what to do with the bloody fabric, I settled for stuffing it into the bathroom's small trashcan. Chase watched every move I made, as if he'd memorize the entire sequence.

Suddenly uncomfortable, I turned towards the sink to wet a washcloth. Never having cleaned a wound before, I decided to start small with the bloody skin around the missing flesh. He'd already almost stopped bleeding, so I just had to clean up the blood that hadn't been absorbed by his shirt and jeans. I patted the skin around the wound and glanced down at the jeans again. The jeans could stay bloody, no way those were coming off while I was around.

"That's not your blood on your face, is it?" Chase asked.

Crap, Maggie's blood was still on my face. I quickly grabbed another towel and started scrubbing at my face in the mirror.

"It's not my blood," I answered. A sudden, horrible thought dawned on me. "I can't get anything from vampire blood, right? Like, nothing bad can happen?"

Chase gave me a weird smile. "Well, as far as I know, vampires don't carry blood-borne diseases. You probably couldn't get one even if they did, since your blood is far different from a human's. Also, demons can't become vampires, even if just getting some vampire

blood in your nose could cause someone to become a vampire. I think you'll be fine."

I started to feel a little silly for asking, but hey, I hadn't known any of that stuff, so now I did.

Chase was still staring at me. I put down the bloody towel and looked at his wound again. "I'll get the first aid kit," I announced nervously.

I never used to carry a first aid kit around with me, but somehow I knew we'd need it at some point . . . imagine that.

When I entered the bedroom, Jason was sitting on the edge of our bed with his face in his hands. Lucy was sitting beside him silently, refusing to look at me. Abel was on his cell phone, murmuring to someone quietly.

Jason looked up when he realized I'd entered the room. "Xoe, I'm so sorry-" he began.

I smiled weakly. "Later, okay?"

He nodded then looked down at the elderly woman's body still crumpled where Abel had left her. I was leaving that one to someone else. I was not in the business of hiding bodies. Maybe Abel would do it. He'd done it for us before.

I realized I still had some of Chase's blood on my hands. My clothes had soaked up some too from helping him into the bathroom. I wiped my hands on my jeans, then proceeded to shuffle through my suitcase. I found the first aid kit at the bottom and stood to go back into the bathroom.

"Is Chase okay?" Jason questioned weakly.

I nodded. "He's fine. We'll all be fine."

I went back into the bathroom without another word.

Chase was standing, examining his wound in the mirror. He didn't look pale, and seemed cognizant enough, so I assumed he hadn't lost a dangerous amount of blood. Demons may be tough, but they can still die from blood loss, just like anyone else.

I pushed him gently to sit back down. "Stop messing with it," I lectured.

Chase smiled, but then his smile quickly faded as I soaked a cotton ball with rubbing alcohol. "No way!" he exclaimed.

I put my free hand on his good shoulder and met his eyes. "Now now," I soothed. "Be a good boy and you'll get a lollipop afterward."

"It'll heal fine," he argued.

Not listening I began to dab the cotton ball on his bite. She'd really done a number on him. Even with his increased healing abilities it would take a while. There was just too much flesh missing.

Chase let out his breath at the initial sting, but didn't complain any further. Only when I really started focusing on the wound, did I

realize that yes, I was staring into a big gaping hole in someone's shoulder. I started to feel dizzy.

Before I could stop myself I swayed to the side. Chase reacted before thinking of his pain and raised both his arms to catch me around the waist. He pulled his arms back down when the pain hit and I went down.

I ended partially leaning against Chase's chest as I tried not to hurt him, while at the same time I tried in vain to get to my feet. Some blood had pooled on the floor, preventing me from getting enough traction to stand. I kept slipping back down and landing on Chase.

Someone cleared their throat from the doorway behind me. I braced myself and turned. Devin had his hand over his mouth to hide his smile. Great, just great. I hadn't heard him come in the room. Jason had propped the nearly shattered door back in place while I was cleaning Chase's wounds, so I would have heard him moving it to come in.

Chase finally got his good arm around my waist and helped me stand with him.

Devin grinned, no longer trying to hide it. "Did somebody call room service? I'm told we have a body or two."

Abel must have called him, and I was grateful for it. I really didn't want to see the body again.

I squinted at Devin suspiciously. "How did you get in?"

"Abel let me in through the adjoining room," he explained, still trying to hide his laughter. "I thought you might be hesitant to open the door to this room. Now about the bodies . . . "

I pointed out into the main room. He knew that was were the bodies were, he just wanted to give me grief. After Devin walked away, I realized that Chase's arm was still around my waist. He squeezed me a little closer and I felt blood soak into the bottom of my shirt. I might have been mad if it wasn't already ruined anyway.

I stepped away. "I need a shower."

"Thanks for doctoring me," he replied.

"Any time," I mumbled.

He nodded, a small smile playing across his face.

I was just so damn amusing today.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I left the bathroom to find Devin and Jason wrapping the elderly woman's body in a rug. That's right, they were seriously wrapping her up in a rug. A second rug had been procured and Maggie's sister was already wrapped up tight. Jason and Abel lifted the ends of the now rolled up rug with only a little visible effort and walked it into the girls' room.

Abel didn't even have to put down his end when he used one hand to grab the knob. The door shut behind them, and I heard another door open and shut as they went out the girl's room and into the hallway. I wasn't sure where they were going with the bodies, it looked pretty darn suspicious, but I figured they had it covered.

It was my turn to go into the girls' room so I could shower. Before I went through, I had a thought, and I turned back to regard Devin as he gathered up the other rug all by himself. "Tell Abel he's doing a bang up job on *protecting* me so far. I might just have to reconsider the whole deal."

Devin's eyebrows raised. "So that's why he was here?" he questioned. "He offered you his protection?"

Apparently it was a secret. Oh well.

"Yes," I answered, "and I took it. Now tell him to do a little better."

Devin smiled politely, something changed in his demeanor and I didn't know what or why. "Of course, I'll get the message to him right away."

I really should have just gone into the other room already, but letting things go is not one of my strong points. "What does Abel offering me his protection mean to you?"

Devin smiled again, the picture of a perfect gentleman, except for the corpse burrito in his arms. "Nothing, nothing at all."

He was lying, but short of threats I couldn't really make him tell me anything. I took a deep breath and went into the girls' room without another word.

Lucy was sitting on the edge of one of the beds. Lela, Max, and Allison still weren't back. I imagined rumors would be circling soon enough and they'd find their way back to our rooms in a hurry.

“Is Chase okay?” Lucy asked.

“Fine,” I grumbled. I grabbed my forgotten shampoos and headed into the bathroom.

I wasn't sure if Lucy deserved my grumpiness, but my adrenaline had faded and I felt like crap. She probably deserved it . . . maybe. I'd think about it later. I just wanted a few minutes alone.

As I had suspected, my clothes were completely ruined. I felt dizzy for a moment thinking about how all that blood had come out of Chase. I sat on the edge of the bathtub to try and steady myself. As I sat I peeled my bloody shirt off and tossed it into the trashcan.

I stood and turned the shower on, then finished undressing. My jeans wouldn’t fit into the little trashcan so I put them in the sink.

After stepping in, I waited for the shower water to run from pink to clear before I shampooed my hair. Ick. I had blood stuck under my fingernails, and I couldn't quite seem to get them clean.

I gave up on my nails and finished showering. Then I got out to find that I once again forgot clean clothes, only this time I was way too tired to care. I wrapped a towel around me and ventured out into the bedroom.

Everyone was huddled in the girls’ room, making it seem smaller than it already was. My suitcase had been placed right outside the bathroom door. I crouched down and picked out some new jeans and a plain white tee-shirt. New bra and undies, and back into the bathroom I went.

I got dressed and came back into the room to find several newcomers. The newcomers in question were dressed in all black, two men and one woman. Their attire and stance practically screamed bodyguard.

“Let me guess,” I said sarcastically. “You're here for our own good.”

I got three curt head nods in response, all in unison. Well at least Abel had chosen to take his job seriously. I decided to ignore our new friends and regarded the old ones so that the inevitable questioning could begin. Lela, Max, and Allison had to have already heard the story from those that were there, but they apparently needed to hear my perspective.

After my recap everyone went silent.

“Why are we all in this room?” I asked.

Max shrugged. “Chase bled all over ours. They’re cleaning it.”

I looked at Max skeptically. “Who’s they?”

“The inn’s staff,” he replied. “Apparently they know.”

I looked to Lela for confirmation.

She shrugged. “The entire staff is one type of supernatural or another. I thought you guys knew.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “How would we know.”

Lela held up her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, but it’s kind of obvious if you paid attention.”

I shook my head. “Whatever.”

I looked around at the room, everyone was staring at the floor dejectedly as if the world had ended. Chase had put on a blue plaid, button up shirt over his bandages. Jason wouldn’t meet my eyes.

I turned away from them all to search the room for my purse. I found it on the night stand by the room’s phone. I tossed it over my shoulder and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Lucy called from behind me, a tinge of anger in her voice.

“Dinner,” I replied curtly, not bothering to turn around. “As soon as you guys are done wallowing, you’re welcome to join me.”

Max was by my side in a split second. We were out in the hall and about to shut the door, when Chase raced out to join us.

I raised my eyebrow in question at him. “I don’t think you’re in much shape for bodyguard duty.”

Chase shrugged, then winced at the pain. “Jason seems to think you don’t want to be around him right now.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Hell hath no fury and all that . . . but had I really been scorned? I didn’t think so, but I was pretty set on acting like I was.

I was hoping that by leaving the room we would escape the bodyguards, but there was a whole other set of them waiting outside the door. I mean, I was grateful for the extra protection and all, but it felt weird having strangers watch us. The bodyguards fell into step behind us without a word. I felt like patting them on the head and saying, “good bodyguards” but I'd probably lose a hand.

I continued down the hallway without another word. Max, Chase, and the bodyguards followed in my wake. We walked down the stairs and past the semi-upscale restaurant that was part of the inn. There was no way we were eating in there.

I almost made it to the front door of the lobby. I was *that* close, when I noticed Darla walking towards us. Her tight curls had been braided back away from her perfectly sculpted face. She was still in the same clothes she had worn earlier, and I realized with a start that I had just met her that morning. It seemed like days ago.

She came to stand before us with arms crossed. Instead of acknowledging anyone else in the group, she just looked directly at me and asked, “Where are you going?”

I smirked up at her. “None of your damn business.”

She sighed loudly like I was wasting her time, when really she was the one that was wasting mine.

“Did you need something?” I asked snarkily when she didn't speak again.

“Abel wants to speak to you in private,” she said, frustration coloring her voice.

I raised an eyebrow at her, but she simply turned around and started walking away. I almost didn't follow her, but thought it might be stupid not to, given that he'd just hidden two bodies for me . . . even though one was his fault.

Darla went into a conference room and shut the door behind her, either assuming that I'd come in behind her, or not really caring either way. I'd go with not caring.

I peeked in the little window to make sure Abel was actually in there, and it wasn't some sort of trap. He was there, and I was surprised to see that Devin wasn't.

“You'll all wait right here?” I asked our little group.

Chase's mouth was set in a stubborn line. “I'd rather come in with you.”

I sighed. “You know that's just going to delay the process. He's going to try and make you leave, and then we're all going to have a nice argument about it. Finally you'll leave, because I actually do want to hear what he has to say.”

Chase nodded, clearly not happy, but it was good enough. I went into the room and shut the door behind me.

Abel and Darla were already sitting on the far end of the long conference table. Without being asked, I walked over and sat down across from Darla with Abel in the end seat.

“I would like to hammer out the details of our arrangement,” Abel announced. “I want to make sure you understand everything Alexondra.”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me, though I'm not fully understanding why Darla is here . . . no offense,” I added, looking at her.

Abel smiled and put his hand on Darla's. “Darla is my wife,” he announced.

“No shit?” I asked loudly, genuinely surprised. “Doesn't that make her like, co-leader?”

Darla chuckled. “Not exactly Xoe. Werewolf hierarchy is extremely chauvinistic.”

“What, is it like a law?” I asked them, feeling grumpy at the idea. Stupid werewolf politics.

Abel shook his head. “Not a law really. Our traditions spring from pragmatism. We fight to become leaders. Men win more fights. Of course, not all men are bigger and stronger than women, but if you take a group of people, the one biggest and strongest person is most likely a man.

“That's why you don't see many female leaders. Female alphas within a pack sure, but for there to be a female pack leader, she would have to be able to physically take on every man in the pack. It happens of course, but just not that often.”

I wrinkled my eyebrows in distaste. “Sounds stupid.”

Darla laughed. “Tell me about it. What they don't get is that most of us are smart enough to stand back and let the men take the beatings for us. I could kick this man's ass any day of the week,” she said, gesturing with a thumb at Abel.

Abel simply smiled and gave Darla's hand a squeeze in return. It was weird seeing him in this element. All happy and . . . domesticated.

“We're getting off topic,” Abel announced. “On to the matter of your protection. I assume you've told your father Alexondra?”

“For the last time, it's Xoe, and yes I told him,” I answered.

Abel steepled his fingers in front of his face with his elbows on the table. “And what did he think?”

I shrugged. “He's not sure of your motives, but he thinks it could be beneficial.”

Abel smiled. “Alexondre, ever the pragmatist.”

It still weirds me out to hear people say my dad's name. Not only do we look freakishly alike, we also have almost the same name. My mom really dropped the ball on that decision.

Abel seemed to be thinking for a few minutes, then finally spoke. “We'll need to make an official announcement, but until then, my protection of you is no secret. If anyone threatens you in any way, you let them know exactly what they're dealing with, as well as alerting me immediately. I'd rather not get jumped unawares by a group of vampires.”

I hadn't really thought of things like that. Abel was really sticking his neck out for me. For some reason though, it didn't make me feel any more trusting. In fact, it just made me more suspicious.

“Also, you need to wear this,” he added handing me a bracelet of braided blue leather cord. The braids were extremely intricate, with the individual cords dyed different shades of blue and blue-green.

“Um, no thanks,” I said, as I tried to hand the bracelet back to him.

Darla held up her wrist to show me the same blue bracelet. “Just wear it,” she ordered. “It won't hurt anything but your pride, and the other wolves will know what it is. You won't have to go out of your way to tell them you're under Abel's protection.”

I took the bracelet reluctantly, but couldn't tie it around my wrist one handed, so Darla reached over the table to help me. Her fingers were long and nimble, and the bracelet was tied in a complicated looking knot in seconds.

I stared at the knot. “Well now I'll never be able to get it off.”

Darla smirked. “That's the point. You need to keep wearing it after you get home. You're representing the coalition in your area now. Any traveling wolves will make note of your standing.”

“They're not going to be looking to me for leadership or anything right?” I asked, needing reassurance.

“They will not.” Abel answered. “They may however, give you a message if they wish to relay something to me.”

“And they don't have phones?” I asked sarcastically.

Abel laughed abruptly. “We're not barbarians Alexondra. They would simply trust someone under my protection to give me a message, more than they would my secretary.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You have a secretary?”

Abel nodded, like it wasn't a big deal. “I am a very busy man Alexondra. I don't have time to take phone calls from every wolf that gets mad at someone in their pack. Serious calls are filtered through to me. I don't concern myself with the others.”

“Well since you don't answer your calls, wouldn't it kind of defeat the purpose if I just had to leave their message with a secretary regardless?” I asked.

“You don't understand Xoe,” Darla answered. “You being under Abel's protection makes you part of the, well I guess you could call it the inner circle, though that sounds a little dramatic for my taste.”

“Okay,” I went on, “so what you're trying to say, is that I can bypass the secretary?”

“In so many words, yes,” Abel responded. “You will be able to speak directly to me. If you feel there is a threat to you and yours, you must notify me right away.”

This was getting complicated. There were probably a million more questions I should have asked, but I was hungry, and I didn't feel like chatting anymore.

I sighed loudly. “Anything else? Is this where you teach me the super secret handshake?”

“We'll teach you the handshake later. First there is the matter of the tattoo . . . ” Abel began.

I jumped up out of my chair, knocking it to the ground. “No way!” I shouted, crossing and uncrossing my arms like an umpire. “There is *no* way you are branding me!”

Abel and Darla erupted into laughter, and I realized that they were screwing with me.

“Sorry,” Abel responded, laughter straining his voice. “I just couldn't resist.”

I crossed my arms across my chest grumpily. “Are we done now?”

Abel nodded with tears streaming down his face. That's me, Xoe Meyers, everyone's favorite source of amusement.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I walked out of the conference room with a sour expression on my face. Chase and Max were sitting on a couch against the wall with a bodyguard standing on either side of them. I noticed the other bodyguard standing by the lobby's front door, watching everyone like a hawk.

I stomped over to the couch. “Ready?”

“I take it the meeting didn't go well?” Chase asked.

“It was fine,” was my reply before turning to walk towards the lobby door.

Max and Chase got up to follow me, and the bodyguards closed in to flank us like a black cloud. It was unnerving as hell, but I grudgingly admitted to myself that it did make me feel safer. Though the main source of comfort was knowing that Jason and the others had their own pack of bodyguards with them in the room.

As we continued out the door, I pulled the SUV keys out of my bag. We walked across the lawn, then all piled into the vehicle silently. I was officially glad for the vehicle, since it fit the three of us, and the three bodyguards. Though now that I was out of the inn, I had no idea where I intended to go.

I decided we’d just drive down the main drag and look for a place to eat. I found one pretty quick, a brick-oven pizza place with a sign that said they sold burgers and stuff too. Something for everyone.

I pulled in and parked. “This okay?” I asked the other passengers, gesturing at the restaurant.

“Well you did already park,” Max said sarcastically.

I grimaced. “Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

“Ok,” Max said simply, seeing my logic and forgiving me. If only all arguments could be so simple.

We got out of the SUV and walked into the restaurant. We were seated quickly in a booth that was all wood with no cushions. It was meant to look rustic, but what it really was, was uncomfortable.

The bodyguards refused to sit and eat with us, and instead stationed themselves strategically around the restaurant, one by the door, one by the bathroom and one seated in a near-by booth.

Chase sat next to me, and Max sat across from us. We decided on

sharing a pizza with all of the fixings. Upon ordering, I remembered how much Max could eat, which was an absurd amount given his size, and added on an order of pasta with Alfredo sauce to share on the side.

We got our drinks, water for me and Chase, soda for Max, and then it was just the three of us.

“So what's with the bracelet?” Chase asked, looping a finger through the offending object on my wrist and lifting it up.

I shrugged, trying to not act as bothered as I actually was. “It's a sign of Abel's protection. Apparently all of the other wolves will recognize it, and know what it symbolizes.”

“And it symbolizes . . . ” Chase began. “Abel's ownership?”

“Like a dog collar!” Max laughed.

I blushed in spite of myself and pointed a finger in Max's face. “Hey buddy, I'm doing this so Abel will protect *all* of us. See these fancy bodyguards all around?” I asked, gesturing to the figures in black. “They're here, because I'm wearing *this*,” I said, putting my bracelet in his face.

Max raised his hands in mock defense. “Calm down,” he said, still laughing. “Please don't light me on fire. You know we all appreciate what you're doing.”

I smiled and finally laughed at myself a little. I crossed my arms and turned my nose up at Max. “Darn tootin',” I responded haughtily, then added, “Maybe I'll get you a bracelet too so you don't feel left out.”

“Oh pretty, pretty please?” Max asked jokingly bouncing in his seat like a little kid.

I smiled. “We’ll see. If you're a good boy, we'll get you a pink one.”

“My favorite!” Max exclaimed, just as the waitress came and sat our food on the table along with three plates. After asking if we needed anything else, she walked away.

Chase shook his head. “I don't know what I'm going to do with the two of you,” he said playfully.

“You're going to eat with us, duh,” I responded tartly.

We all quickly filled our plates. Out of our complete group, the three of us are the ones with the biggest appetites. Ordering the pasta was definitely a good idea.

“So why is Lucy mad?” Max asked, mouth full of pizza.

There it was, no building up to it, no warning of intent. I didn't really know why Lucy was mad. I knew why she was bothered, and maybe a little uncomfortable, but all any of us had done was to protect her and everyone else.

I shook my head and swallowed my bite of pasta. “She's upset because of what happened with the vampires that ended up in our

rugs. She's also upset that I would have put Maggie in the same place if I'd had any choice."

Max stared at me for a heartbeat. "Why would that make her mad?"

Hallelujah, I wasn't the only one that didn't get it. "I'm not sure, really. I would love for someone to explain it to me."

We both looked at Chase, and he shrugged. "They would have killed us. I don't see what the big problem is."

I found myself wondering just what Lela's viewpoint was. For some reason, I thought she'd side with us. Lela was a lot of things, and one of them was a survivor. She did what she had to do. Maybe we could make teams and have a nice little debate on the topic.

"How's your shoulder?" I asked turning towards Chase, changing the subject.

He shrugged, then winced. "It would be fine if I didn't keep forgetting there was a chunk torn out of it."

"It's healing okay though?" I prompted.

"In a few days I'll be right as rain," he replied.

You gotta hand it to supernatural healing. Out of the three of us, Chase actually healed the slowest, even though he had more demon blood than I do.

Both of his parents were demons, so he got demon blood from both sides, whereas I only got it from my dad. The difference is that my "demon line" is more powerful, hence better healing. Max heals even faster than I do. Werewolves are freaky like that.

"That raises another question," Max interjected. "What the heck did you do to that vampire Chase?"

Chase looked down, embarrassed. "You didn't tell them?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "When you told me, you made it seem like it was for my ears only."

Chase smiled. "I appreciate that."

Max was staring at us with his mouth open in mock annoyance. "When you two are done grinning at each other, could one of you please answer my question?"

I blushed and looked down. "My mom was a Naga," Chase explained.

Max raised his eyebrows. "What the heck is a Naga?"

"A snake person," I answered as if it was common knowledge. "like in Hindu mythology."

"So . . . " Max prompted.

"I'm poisonous," Chase answered.

"*That*," Max began, "is So. Cool. So what happens when you make out with chicks? Do they die?"

Chase laughed. “No Max, they do not die. My fangs are retractable.”

“So unlike our little Xoe here,” Max joked, “You probably won't accidentally kill your mate of choice.”

I frowned at him. “I'm yet to kill anyone by accident, thank you very much. You better just hope I don't start with you.”

“Speaking of our choice in mates,” Chase said to Max, “care to enlighten us about your brief stint as Allison's suitor?”

“Yes Max,” I added, fluttering my eyelashes at him. “Do tell.”

Max shrugged as a blush crept up his cheeks. “She's cute, and I like how she's all bossy, so I asked her out.”

“She might be cute,” Chase answered, “but that girl is scary.”

“Aw,” I cut in. “I thought *I* was the scariest girl around.”

“You're scary because you can light things on fire with your mind, and you're beautiful to boot,” Chase said casually. “Allison is scary because she has absolutely no doubt of her ability to get her way, no matter the situation.”

Max laughed at Chase's analysis. I was stuck on him calling me beautiful. Had it been a slip up? I didn't think so. He didn't seem at all embarrassed about saying it.

“I guess I like 'em confident,” Max replied. “Though it becomes a major personality flaw when the confident person wants to become a werewolf.”

We sobered up a bit at that.

“I'm not going to let her do it,” I stated.

“You may not be able to stop her for long,” Chase countered.

I frowned, thinking about Allison.

“Oh, shut up and call her beautiful again,” Max said loudly. “Her expression was a lot better then, than it is now.”

Chase finally blushed. “I was simply stating a fact,” he explained. “Xoe is a scary beautiful demon with a penchant for destroying household appliances.”

I was still thinking way too hard about things, but we all laughed and went back to our food. We managed to finish every scrap of food, and have an uneventful dinner, complete with witty banter and entree sharing.

Imagine that.

After dinner we reluctantly drove back to the inn. I found myself once again thinking about just giving up and going home. I missed home. What I wouldn't give to just lie down in my bed and feel safe again. I hadn't felt completely safe in a really long time.

It wasn't really the werewolves that had caused problems, though many of them had been quite unpleasant. I had a bad feeling we hadn't seen the last of Maggie. Honestly, she didn't seem all that scary

to me. Sure, she was super strong, and super fast, but who wasn't around here? Yet she came with friends, and we'd just killed her sister. Grief can fuel a lot of rage. Rage gets people dead.

Chase, Max, and I walked across the front lawn, bodyguards in tow. We all stopped at the same time.

Things seemed unusually quiet around the inn. Like way too quiet. As in, there was no one. Anywhere. In the words of Scooby Doo, “Ruh Roh.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Max and one of the bodyguards trotted ahead into the inn. They came back out quickly. Max shook his head. Gone. We'd left Jason, Allison, Lucy, and Lela in the room. Chase tried to grab me as I bolted. They couldn't all be gone.

I slipped his grip and made it to the front door. Max followed me inside. I assumed Chase wouldn't be far behind. The bodyguards stayed on the porch. Apparently we'd fallen outside of their job description.

I frantically climbed the stairs to our floor, not willing to wait on the elevator. The inn was completely deserted, not a single sign of life. I went in through the girls' room, since that was where we'd left everyone. It was spotless. The beds were made, and everyone's luggage was gone, including mine.

Numb, I went to sit on the nearest bed. I was too afraid to check the other room. I knew what I would find. Max entered the room, shortly followed by Chase. They each came to sit on either side of me on the bed.

“What's going on?” Max asked, voice shaky.

I turned to look at his elvish face, usually filled with good humor to find a single tear sliding down his cheek. I hadn't gotten to tears yet. I knew they would come in time if we didn't figure things out.

Chase put his arm around me. I could smell the blood from his bandages. “We should keep looking. If we can't find anyone, we need to leave. Waiting here won't do any good.”

I nodded and stood up slowly, letting Chase's arm drop from my shoulders. I stumbled as I started to walk to the door and Max caught me. It took me a second to regain my footing. I felt like I was in a dream. I looked down at my ring and it was dead, no signs of swirling lights.

When we reached the lawn, the bodyguards were gone. Gre-at. The sky was blue and perfect. It seemed wrong given the circumstances. Something was going on, some kind of . . . magic.

“We can't get out!” Max called from my left.

I turned to look at him, he was pushing at thin air like there was something solid there. I walked cautiously to the edge of the lawn. It

got harder to breathe the closer I got. I raised my hands, and there was . . . something. Not a wall exactly, it felt more like static. Static so thick that we couldn't push through it.

Chase came to stand by my side. He lifted his hand up beside mine, then slowly let it drop.

“It's some kind of magic,” he said, shaking his head.

Max came to stand at my other side. “I found the bodyguards.”

I looked a question at him. He looked green. Rather than answer with words, he pointed. I followed the direction of his finger to the inn's front porch. We'd run right past them. Well, what was left of them.

Even from the distance I could tell they were no longer . . . intact. Blood dripped in a steady flow down the wooden slats. It was one of those train wreck moments where you wanted to unsee everything, but instead you walk closer to find out all of the details.

We stopped walking about ten feet away from the corpses. Ten feet was more than close enough. A foul odor seeped up from the pile. I'd always heard that fresh death came with an ugly smell, especially when someone is cut up enough that the fluids and other matter inside are exposed to the clear blue sky. I turned away quickly and lost my lunch. Max wasn't far behind me. Chase managed to keep his cookies.

I spit a few times to clear the taste of bile out of my mouth, then stumbled farther from the bodies to sit in the grass.

Chase came to stand beside me. “We have to try to get out.”

I tried to summon a flame into my hand. Maybe if I could make a flame large enough I could throw it at the magical barrier. My hands didn't seem to want to work. I had a sneaking suspicion that I was going into shock. I couldn’t get my magic, or ability, or whatever you wanted to call it to work.

Max sat down, far to my side but still in my peripheral vision. He was obviously trying to not interfere as I stared at my hand like it was a tool that was broken.

“Why aren't they coming?” I asked no one in particular.

“Who?” Max asked.

It took me a minute to realize what he'd asked. Yeah, definitely in shock. “Whomever killed the bodyguards. Why are we still alive?”

“Do you guys smell that?” Max asked, ignoring my question.

I was pretty sure that my question was a lot more pertinent, but I answered, “I've been trying not to smell too hard.”

Max shook his head. “I couldn't smell it before, all I smelled was the bodies, that's why I noticed them. It smells like musty stone. Like a cave.”

I took a whiff. I smelled moisture, like the smell before it rains, but there was something different about it. Max was right, it smelled like

a cave, or somewhere underground.

I closed my eyes and focused on the smell. Once I focused on that, I felt cold. The grass beneath me felt like stone. I opened my eyes and the sky was gone.

“We're not in Kansas anymore,” I mumbled. Then I realized I had no one to mumble to. I was mumbling alone in an empty stone cavern. I wasn't alone for long.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

She was preceded by a rather wicked cackle. First I saw torchlight. There was other light in the cavern, but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. Maggie came prancing around the corner, torch in hand. She'd swapped her floral dress for a black one. It flowed past her knees to meet with knee-high black boots. I wouldn't have chosen stilettos for stomping around in caves, but then again, I hadn't chosen to go stomping around in a cave to begin with.

"Oh little girl," she chimed. "Did you really think it was a good idea to stand up to a vampire."

My laugh was harsh and dry, and probably sounded more like I was choking. "You didn't do this on your own. You don't have that kind of power."

She cocked her head. "Don't I?"

I looked her dead in the eye. "No, you don't. Where are my friends?"

She laughed. "Oh you don't need to worry about them. Well, at least the ones you left at the *real* inn. I still care a little for Jason after all of these years. I might just have to explore those feelings more, once you're out of the way."

Ignoring her not-so-subtle prod, I asked, "What about Chase and Max?"

She shrugged. "Them you might have to worry about. If they ever manage to think their way out of that fabricated reality, they'll just end up down here, and I assure you, I'm not the only bad thing in this neck of the woods."

I smiled bitterly. "I'm assuming the one that actually created that reality is down here? I'd say that wolf is probably much bigger and badder than you."

She smiled back, but not like she was happy. "We are far better than wolves my dear. Though yes, he is down here somewhere. I'll have to have a word with him. It should have taken you longer to get out. I was so enjoying watching your confusion. By the way, you reek of vomit."

She'd walked close enough that I spit at her, wiping the smile off her face. Now she could smell like vomit too. Surprisingly my gesture

didn't cause her to attack me . . . yet.

Her smile returned quickly. “Remember how you couldn't arouse your magic in that other reality? You can't do it here either. I wanted to show you just how weak you are. I wanted you to realize your inferiority before I killed you.”

I smiled again. “You know, you're the third psychopath that has lectured me before you killed me. Yet, here I still am. Can't say the same for the other two.”

I was bluffing. I was screwed without my magic. I'm stronger and faster than a normal human, but nowhere near as strong and fast as a vampire. She either had a demon or a witch helping her. Since we were in a creepy underground lair, I guessed demon. They had a weird penchant for creepy underground lairs. Not that the realization helped me any.

“So what did you offer the demon that helped you?” I asked, throwing her off guard.

Her smile faltered again. Yippee. “That, little girl, is none of your concern.”

It was my turn to smile. “No, I guess it's not, but it *should* be your concern. I think you should be concerned with getting out of here after you kill me. I think you should be concerned with the fact that a demon would just as soon eat you as send you merrily on your way.”

“I'm not afraid of demons.”

I laughed. “No Maggie, you're not afraid of me, or maybe you are, seeing as you went to all of this trouble to magically neuter me. This demon had the power to create an alternate reality that trapped two demons and a werewolf. I'd say maybe this demon is a little scary.”

Maggie sneered at me. “I have a deal with him. I'll be home safe and sound as soon as I dispatch you.”

“If by home,” I replied, “You mean the burning fiery hell pit in which you belong, then yes, you will be there very soon.”

An anger filled, “Enough of this,” was the only warning I had before she rushed me. I stood and tried to dodge out of the way, but she was too fast for me. She grabbed me and used her momentum to toss me in the air like a rag-doll.

I smacked into the stone wall with a thud, and slid into a pile of rocks. I looked down in horror when I realized that amongst the rocks were bones. Most of them had been either shattered or gnawed to little stumps. I tried to pretend that they were animal bones, but I knew I was fooling myself. The teeth on that jawbone looked a little too human.

My left shoulder throbbed from the impact, but I was otherwise numb. I was guessing numb was a bad thing. Numbness after getting hurt usually meant either your body was yet to register the pain, or

nerves were damaged. I was probably hurt a lot worse than I could feel.

Maggie stalked towards me. The only way she could tower over me was if I was on the ground, so that's where she'd put me.

“You brought this all on yourself,” she spat down at me. “You had to be a snarky little twit. You could have just walked away.”

I smiled and felt something wet drip down my face. I realized it was probably blood, but I ignored it. “Now Maggie,” I lectured. “If I had walked away, you would have just been more jealous when you realized that my butt is way nicer than yours. You would have probably tried to kill me on the spot.”

I was going to die, but I'd be damned if she had the last word. Suddenly Chase materialized behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. She whipped around in surprise and I took the opportunity to kick her just below her right kneecap. There was a loud crunch and she went down.

Before I could blink I had her dainty little fangs inches from my face. Chase grabbed her hair to hold her back as she snapped at me like a rabid dog. The leg I had kicked was bent at an odd angle, but she didn't seem to feel it yet.

Like a slow-motion horror scene, her snapping jaw inched closer to my face. I fumbled around in the pile of rocks and bones until I wrapped my hand around a large stone. I promptly smashed that large stone to the side of Maggie's skull.

She fell away from me, but within seconds turned on Chase, screaming unintelligibly about him killing her sister. He fell back with his right arm raised to keep her teeth away from his throat and she started worrying at his arm like a starving animal. For the second time today Maggie was seconds away from doing some serious damage to Chase. I didn't want to do what I was about to do, but I couldn't quite stand up to help him, so I was doing it anyway.

“I want to make a deal!” I called out.

Maggie paused and faced me with blood running down her mouth and neck. “What are you doing!” she snarled.

I ignored her. “Oh big powerful demon!” I called. “I think I can offer you much more than some little vampire!”

Maggie lunged at me as another form materialized in the cavern. He was Friggin. Huge. He had to be around 6'7” and built like a tank. His skin was the darkest color I'd ever seen on skin, so dark that it had purple and blue highlights. His eyes were black, and not just the pupil and iris, the entire eye.

He grabbed Maggie mid lunge like she weighed nothing. She was left dangling from his grip on the back of her dress. “We had a deal!” she screamed, enraged.

Ignoring her, the demon turned to me. He smiled. His teeth were pointed. “What kind of deal, little one?”

“Um,” I began, glancing at Chase. He was cradling his bloody arm to his chest. He gave me a *what are you doing?* look and I turned back to the demon. “First I have to know what Maggie offered you, then I'll better the deal.”

He smiled again. He smelled like rotten meat. I was pretty sure I knew who had killed the bodyguards. He spoke in a surprisingly cultured voice. “She offered me her vampiric lackies to run my errands up top.” He looked at the ceiling of the cavern, which really wasn't that far from his face. “Those of us unlucky enough to have no trace of human blood can only go up top when summoned.”

Did that mean my dad had some human blood? I'd think about that later, if there was a later. My dad was going to have to sit down and tell me all of the information I was lacking. I really didn't appreciate getting into so many life or death situations without knowing the rules.

“Do you know who my dad is?” I asked, trying to buy time.

The demon started swinging Maggie back and forth like a toy. “I grow tired of your games little one,” he replied.

“My dad is Alexondre. Do you know him?” I pressed.

The demon chuckled. “Oh Alexondre, he used to be so much fun back in the day . . . until he started sullying himself with that human woman. I was unaware there were any offspring.”

I bit my tongue before I said something I would regret in response to him insulting my mom. Instead I said, “So you're friends? You and my dad?”

The demon let Maggie slump to the ground, but still kept a hold of her. “I said I knew Alexondre, not that we were friends.”

“Well, wouldn't it be nice to have him owe you a favor?” I asked hopefully.

My dad probably wouldn't appreciate me bartering with his favors, but hell, he owed me too. It was time for him to pay up.

The demon eyed me skeptically. “What could Alexondre possibly do for me?”

Maggie started crying. I almost felt bad for her. Then she started mumbling about how she'd see me and my entire family burn and I stopped feeling bad.

“Well, what would you want?” I asked.

“Xoe, don't do this,” Chase interrupted.

The demon pointed a finger back at Chase. “*You*, are not in this conversation. Your bloodlines are so mixed up that I feel tainted even being near you.”

“Just keep me here and let Xoe go,” Chase blurted out. “I'll do your

errands. I can come and go easier than vampires."

The demon turned to look at Chase. Maggie struggled as he dragged her across the floor, then gave up and went limp.

"I believe I said you were not in this conversation," the demon lectured. "Speak again and I'll kill you."

This was going nowhere. There was obviously one thing that the demon really wanted. "What if my dad and I could find a way for you to go up top whenever you liked?"

"Xoe stop!" Chase shouted.

The demon smiled again. "Little one, if I could do that, I would never come down here again, but I fear it is not possible."

Crap, I didn't really have anything else to bargain with. It really probably wasn't possible.

"Let us try," I pleaded, ignoring Chase. "and if we can't, then I'll run your errands personally."

He showed me his pointed teeth again. "Done."

"We had a deal!" Maggie screamed, as she began to thrash around in the demon's grip.

I got to my feet and shakily walked to where Maggie dangled. My legs and back still felt slightly numb, so standing at all was a major feat.

"Little girl," I chided.

Maggie went still and met me with scared eyes. I almost felt sorry for her . . . almost.

Chase came to stand beside me, shirt soaked in blood. He smiled, even though he was a little too pale and *so* was not happy with the situation.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you," he continued for me.

"Not to make deals with demons?" we said in unison.

I couldn't help but think that Chase was lecturing me as much as he was lecturing Maggie.

The large demon chuckled, then promptly tore Maggie's heart out of her chest. I was going to be sick again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"My name is Bartimus," the demon explained, "but you may call me Bart."

Just when I thought I'd heard everything, now I was meeting Bart the demon.

Bart had manifested a small cafe table and a teapot with two cups. Chase wasn't allowed to sit at the table. He was sulking in the corner. Bartimus looked even more massive sitting in his little wrought iron chair.

I sat in the other small chair and Bart poured us each a cup of tea and took a sip of his. Our tea came from the same teapot, so I grabbed mine and took a sip. Hopefully this wasn't a *Princess Bride* type of situation and I was about to die of Iocaine poisoning. The tea tasted like cinnamon.

"You never told me your name little one," Bart prompted.

"It's Xoe," I answered.

"Not just Xoe," he argued. "That's not your full name, I can tell."

"How?" I asked, suspicious.

"Little Xoe, my powers are of the mind," he explained. "I can create other realities. Little white lies don't get by me. Due to this, I also know you have no intention of actually helping me."

"I would be a fool to break a deal with a demon," I countered.

"Yes you would," Bart agreed, "but you hope that since you and your father are demons as well, that you can get around that little rule."

I shrugged, feeling ill. "It was worth a shot."

Bart grinned, and the stench of rotting meat dripped from his mouth over the scent of the tea. I was about to get eaten. I was totally going to get eaten. I started to stand.

"Calm down little one," Bart chided. "I'm not going to eat you. I would not eat Alexondre's only child. That would be barbaric."

I relaxed thinking that Bart was the last person I'd expect to not do something just because it was barbaric.

"I'll simply need a vial of your blood," Bart said as if it was the most common thing in the world to say.

"No," Chase said very firmly as he stood.

Bart stood as well and walked toward Chase. Chase stood his ground. Bully for him, he was still about to get himself killed.

“I'll do it!” I shouted. “If you tell me what it's for.”

“No, you will not,” came a voice from the other side of the cavern.

Bartimus whipped around in surprise, then smiled. “Alexondre! How lovely it is to see you!”

“What exactly do you think you are doing with my daughter?” my dad asked, a grim expression on his face.

Bartimus grinned even wider. “Little girl made a deal with me,” he explained.

My dad turned to me with one of those looks on his face that are reserved for the sole use of parents who are extremely disappointed in their children.

I looked down at my teacup. “I didn't really have a choice,” I mumbled.

“She really didn't,” Bart agreed.

My dad turned to Chase. “Your job is to keep her *out* of trouble. You seem to have failed.”

“Don't blame him,” I interrupted. “He's already gotten munched on twice by vampires in the line of duty.”

Bartimus was practically bouncing up and down with excitement, for all the world like a giddy school girl. A giant, flesh-eating demon school girl. The image would have been comical if we weren't in such terrible circumstances.

My dad sighed loudly. “You're not taking her blood Bart.”

Bart lost his grin. “Then how will I ensure her promise?”

“You won't,” my dad explained. “There is no deal.”

Bart raised a hairy eyebrow. “Do you really want to go there Alexondre? You may or may not be able to take me, but where will that leave our little Xoe in the meantime? Where will that leave her when I crush your bones?”

My dad had a sour expression on his face. “I give you my word,” he mumbled.

“What was that?” Bartimus called out, grinning and cupping a massive hand to his ear. “I couldn't quite hear you, dear friend.”

“I give you my word that I will do whatever Xoe has promised you,” my dad stated clearly.

Bart snapped his finger and a long paper scroll appeared in one of his hands, and a feather quill in the other. The paper looked like a contract.

“Seriously, are we in a Disney movie or something?” I remarked.

Bart ignored me and thrust the contract at my dad.

“What did you promise him anyhow?” my dad asked.

I couldn't quite meet his eyes. “Um,” I mumbled. “Just to help him

gain his freedom to live in the human world."

"Oh Xoe," my dad sighed. "It *had* to be that."

Bart chuckled as my dad signed the contract.

My dad walked over and grabbed my hand without another word, while I stayed sitting in the chair. I wasn't sure if I could stand again anyhow. He signaled for Chase to grab my other hand, and Chase obeyed silently.

"Send us back up," my dad demanded.

"Can't get out yourselves?" Bart mocked.

"I know very well what type of wards you employ Bart," my dad grumbled. "Now send us back or our deal won't do either of us any good."

Bart grinned wickedly and snapped his fingers. I felt a sickening whooshing feeling in my gut, and clung to Chase and my dad like lifelines.

We ended up in the grass in front of the inn. My knees gave out as the world steadied itself around us, but Chase and my dad kept us upright. My dad let go of my hand as Chase put his arm around my waist to keep me on my feet.

I seemed to be struggling with a great deal of vertigo and my limbs remained numb. Chase finally hoisted me up into his arm and started carrying me towards the inn with my dad walking beside us.

A few werewolves in the lobby gave us weird looks and I managed to give them a little salute. They could gawk all they wanted. I'd take gawking werewolves over the empty alternate reality inn any day of the week.

The rest of our group was waiting for us when we got back. They were not exactly calm. Apparently they were the ones that had called my dad, so they knew he was coming to the rescue, but they obviously didn't have much faith in him, because we caught them in the act of devising battle plans of their own.

Jason ran to Chase and took me out of his arms. "What's wrong with her?" he asked.

"Vertigo," Chase explained. "Traveling by demonic means can be a bit much when you're not really used to it. Traveling from a warded demon lair is quite a bit worse."

"Will she be okay?" Jason prompted.

"I'm right here," I interrupted, looking up at him from the cradle of his arms. "I might also be injured, besides the vertigo. I'm not sure. Could you put me down now?"

Jason smiled, ignoring my grumpiness. He took a moment to hold me a little tighter, then placed me gently on the bed. I was starting to feel better and managed to sit up on my own. Jason scooted in close to me, and gripped my hand as if he didn't quite believe that I was

actually there.

I leaned against him and let him support most of my weight. I didn't need the help sitting up, but just feeling him next to me again was pretty much the best feeling in the world right then.

I regarded the rest of our group standing around us. Lucy and Allison looked as if they just didn't know what to do with themselves. Lela was looking at my dad with a nervous expression on her face. I didn't blame her, my dad could be pretty scary.

I envied everyone their ability to stand. Standing would still take a little while. I was having trouble focusing on any one thing in the room.

I was able to focus well enough to see Max sitting on the edge of the other bed. “Glad to see you made it back,” I commented.

Max glared at me. “I was stuck at that *other* inn with the dead body guards until about thirty minutes ago.”

“Hey, it's not my fault you couldn’t think your way out of it,” I snipped. “The place we ended up was definitely not an improvement.”

Max still looked cranky. I was guessing he was more upset that he couldn't get out of the other reality and Chase and I could. Bartimus must have freed him after he decided to deal with us rather than Maggie. Or maybe Bart just decided to stop putting any effort into the other reality, and Max was freed because Bart just didn't care. I was leaning towards the second option.

“So are you going to tell us what happened?” Allison prompted anxiously. “Max told us about the empty inn, but where did you and Chase go?”

I thought for a minute on the easiest way to explain it. “Maggie hired a demon to trap us. We ended up in his lair. The demon killed Maggie, now we owe the demon.”

“Owe him what?” Lucy asked.

Jason pushed a little closer to me, if that was even possible. “Um,” I began. “It doesn't matter right now. We'll figure it out when we get home.”

No one pushed me for more information. I imagined I looked just as bad as I felt at that moment.

“Well I'm off to try and sort out this mess,” my dad announced.

“How did you find us so quickly anyhow?” I asked before he could disappear.

My dad gave me a look like I was asking a silly question. “I couldn't sense you through Bart's wardings, but as soon as Max described what had happened, I knew where you would be.”

That made sense, since he'd known Bart back in the day.

“Wait,” I demanded again, when I saw he was still about to leave. “What are we going to do?”

“*We* will not be doing anything Alexondra,” he replied. “I'm now contractually bound to figure out a way to help Bartimus. If it can be done, I'll have to do it, then I'll have to kill him. Bartimus cannot be released into this world.”

“What would he have done with my blood,” I asked.

“Bart can focus his power using someone's blood,” he explained. “His mind games are strong enough without the extra control.”

“Tell me about it,” I mumbled.

There was a flash of flame and my dad was gone.

There was a knock at the door. No way. No more people. Hadn't I dealt with enough? Lela jumped into action and was at the door in seconds. She had barely opened it when Abel came striding in, followed closely by Devin.

Seeing me alive and well, Abel breathed a visible sigh of relief. “You are not making this arrangement easy,” Abel grumbled at me.

I shrugged. “Sorry. Take heart in the fact that it sucks a lot more for me.”

“Was it a demon that took you?” he asked.

“Do you really want an explanation?” I responded tiredly.

Abel furrowed his brow. “I don't. Not right now at least, but I do want to know if I have to protect you from demons as well as vampires.”

I shrugged. “I don't think you'll have to protect me from a demon just yet, or any vampires for that matter.”

Abel seemed to relax a little bit more. Devin raised his hand to hide his smile. I was yet to see Devin angry or upset. He always seemed amused. It was unnerving.

“The packs are getting ready to vote,” Abel announced.

“*Now*?” I whined. “I *just* got back. How did you know anything was wrong anyhow?”

Abel glared at me. I was getting a lot of glares lately. “Three dead werewolves appeared suddenly at the front door, along with Max.”

I opened my mouth to explain.

“No,” Abel held up a hand. “Explanations can come later, you need to get ready.”

I closed my eyes in frustration and Jason wrapped his arms around me. “Can't it wait?” he asked.

“No,” Abel replied, then walked back out of the room.

Just then I noticed that Devin was holding a garment bag. “That better not be what I think it is,” I said warily.

Devin gave me a truly evil look. “Abel is announcing his protection over you. Matchy matchy time. Werewolves do love a good show.”

“Well shit,” I replied, at a loss for words.

“Time to stand up and get ready,” Devin prompted.

Stand up? Easier said than done. A demon's life is never easy.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The dress was midnight blue and strapless, with glimmers of tiny crystals visible along the bodice. I'd worn more dresses in the past days than I had my entire life. I wasn't starting to like it any more. In the end Allison and Lucy had helped me hobble into the bathroom to change.

Walking was getting easier, I just hoped the ability fully came back to me by the time of the vote. I had a feeling looking weak would not be a good thing. Plus it was frustrating as heck not being able to make my limbs work properly.

My back was a colorful speckling of healing bruises from being thrown against the cavern wall by Maggie. The dress showed all of the bruises on my upper back. Screw it.

I was sitting on the bathroom sink again while Allison worked on my face. I'd struggled at first, but I couldn't exactly run away. Lucy was sitting on the closed toilet seat.

Allison finished her work and I started to slide down from the counter-top. During my descent, the hem of my dress caught on the faucet. My feet met the ground and at the same time I heard a loud rip. I'd just gone and torn my dress. It was the straw that broke the camel's back.

“Screw it!” I threw up my arms haphazardly.

I stumbled out of the bathroom, completely fed up. I went and plopped on the floor by my suitcase and started pawing through my clothes. This was just all too much. I was done with stupid dresses. I turned my back to face the room and scooted the dress down off of my chest so I could put a bra on, then pulled my new dark blue *Les Mis* shirt on.

I forced myself to stand, bracing against the wall as I regarded the room. Max and Lela had turned to give me privacy. Allison and Lucy were standing just outside the bathroom door looking at me like I had lost my mind. Chase looked worried, and Jason's eyes were full of pity. I didn't want pity, but yet I couldn't help it as the first tear slid down my face. Jason walked up and took the jeans out of my hand.

I swayed as Jason searched for the dress zipper, then started working it down over my hips. Chase came to stand in front of me and

gave me his arms for balance. Someone had bandaged his new wounds while I was holed up in the bathroom. He looked at my tear streaked face with a reassuring smile. Jason managed to get the dress off, then helped me step into my jeans.

“No more dress up,” I said to Chase shakily.

He nodded. “I'm with you on that one.”

No one else said anything as Jason helped me to the bed so I could put my shoes on. I was beginning to worry that I actually had nerve damage from being thrown against the wall.

Chase voiced my concerns out loud.

Jason nodded. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Will I be ok?” I asked, suddenly nervous.

Jason smiled. “You healed a broken bone pretty fast last year. You should be fine soon enough.”

I let out a sigh of relief, making my ribs hurt. Allison came to stand in front of me with a makeup wipe. I'd probably screwed my mascara all to hell, so she graciously just wiped it all off.

“Let's go,” I announced.

No one argued.

Jason lifted me back into his arms. “I'll put you back down when we reach the lobby,” he explained. “Then we can help you walk from there.”

He pushed his way through the door with the rest of our group following behind us.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“You're welcome,” he answered.

“And Jason?” I asked.

“Yes Xoe?” he asked, smiling down at me.

“I love you,” I answered.

“Get a room!” Max yelled from behind us, then started making loud gagging noises.

“I love you too,” Jason answered with laughter in his voice.

Something started happening to my chest, and I realized I was laughing too. Imagine that.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Abel had gawked at my jeans and sneakers, but the vote was passed anyway. We were officially a werewolf pack. He had also announced his protection over me. There were some less than happy faces over that, but no one argued out loud.

We all made it back to Shelby in one piece. I was relieved to be home, though the looming problem of Bartimus was still on my mind. Allison was still a human, but now that we were home I knew she'd continue on her quest to become a werewolf. What she didn't know was that I'd put the kibosh on her plans.

I'd had Devin spread the word that anyone who dared try and change Allison would have to answer to me, and in effect would have to answer to Abel. I was still considering locking her in a closet though.

I knew it wouldn't be long before Bartimus started pestering me about his release into our world, and Allison started pestering me about why the werewolves she met were unwilling to turn her, but I decided these were simply all problems for tomorrow . . . or maybe the day after. Today I would become reacquainted with my bed.

I sank into my pillows and thought about my mom. She'd hugged me when I got home, but didn't ask about the trip. She didn't ask if I was now the leader of a werewolf pack, or if we had been attacked by vampires and demons. It made me sad. I had always been able to talk to her before, and now she was too afraid to even ask what was going on in my life.

I couldn't help but be a bit angry with her too. I'd had to accept all of the things that were happening. I'd accepted that this was my life now. She was my mom, shouldn't she be accepting things too?

I was beginning to drift off, surrounded by the nest I had made out of my pillows, when a soft knock at my door startled me back into wakefulness.

My first thought was that maybe my mom wanted to talk after all. The door opened while I was still thinking about it, and Lucy and Allison came creeping into my room. I wasn't surprised to see Lucy. So we had a difference in morals with the whole killing people thing. What were a few scruples between friends?

When they saw me snuggled amongst my mass of pillows, they took one look at each other then made a running jump in unison. They ended up dog-piled on top of me until I tickled and pinched them away.

We ended up sprawled on my bed side-by-side, with me in the middle, breathing heavily and laughing.

“So how are you feeling, oh great and powerful leader?” Lucy asked.

I thought about it for a moment. “I feel ancient and tired, yet young and afraid at the same time.”

Allison turned her head to look at me. “Wow Xoe, that was pretty deep for you,” she said sarcastically.

I reached for a pillow and sat up so I could pretend to smother her. “Look away Lucy,” I commanded. “You don't need to see this.”

“Oh trust me Xoe,” Lucy replied playfully, “I've been wanting to get rid of Allison for a looooong time.”

Allison wrestled the pillow away from me and propped it under her head. “You two suck,” she chided, but was smiling while she said it.

A throat cleared in the doorway. We all glanced up to see Max standing there with three pizza boxes in his hands.

“Oh please,” he said, moving the pizzas to one hand so he could gesture with the other for us not to get up. “Don't let me interrupt the all girls pillow fight. I can wait.”

Suddenly a pillow whipped across the room to hit Max in the face with a loud thwap. He almost dropped the pizzas in surprise. I turned to give Lucy a high five as we all erupted into raucous laughter. It felt good to laugh again.

Max stomped over to the bed and plopped the pizza boxes down at our feet. “Where are Chase and Jason?” he asked as he sat on the edge of the bed.

It was a good question. Jason and Allison had both left cars at the airport. Allison had taken Lucy, Max, and Lela home, and Chase and I rode with Jason. They had dropped me off first. I knew Jason was going home to unpack, but I hadn't thought to ask Chase where he was going. He'd had a hotel room before our trip, courtesy of my dad, but I had no idea if he still had it.

I reached across Lucy to grab my phone off of the nightstand and scrolled through my recent calls to find Chase.

He answered barely after the first ring with a questioning, “Hello?”

“Where are you?” I asked, not bothering to explain my whole thought process.

“Umm . . . ” he replied.

“You don't have a hotel room anymore do you?” I asked.

“Well, I kind of checked out when we left,” he explained, “because I didn't know if I'd be coming back to Shelby. Now the hotel won't let me pay cash and I don't have a credit card.”

“Did you call my dad?” I asked.

“I tried,” he explained, “but he's down dealing with demons, trying to figure out what to do about Bart.”

“So where are you now?” I laughed.

“Well,” he answered. “I was sitting on a park bench, preparing to call you. Now I'm standing beside said park bench.”

I laughed again. “Come over loser. Max bought pizza. I'm sure my mom won't mind you staying on our couch, and if she does you can stay with Jason.”

I could practically hear him smiling on the other end of the line. “Be there in a sec,” he answered then quickly hung up.

“Taking on a new roommate?” Allison asked sarcastically.

Before I could answer, Lucy shot Max a stern look. “Girl talk, get out.”

Max feigned offense. “Oh come on, I already know that Chase is in love with Xoe.”

“Did he say something?” Lucy demanded.

Max had an expression on his face that said we were all being extremely silly. “Oh come on,” he answered, “no one had to say anything to me. It is *so* blatantly obvious.”

“Yeah,” Allison agreed, “But boys aren't supposed to be able to pick up on things like that.”

“I'll have you know, I'm extremely perceptive!” Max argued as Allison got up and shoved him out of the door.

A few seconds later the downstairs TV turned on and the sounds of a soccer game filled the silence.

“So,” Allison began, “Don't you think Jason is going to mind if Chase stays here.”

I shrugged, feeling defensive. “Well then he can stay with Jason if Jason doesn't want him here. I don't really care, he just needs a place to stay.”

Allison looked at me like I was being a difficult child. “This is *us* you're talking to Xoe, your life-long best friends. You can admit that you care . . . at least just a little.”

“Fine I care . . . just a little,” I answered. The front door opened and shut downstairs. “Now everyone shut up about it.”

We left my bedroom carrying the pizzas to find Chase watching soccer with Max. I plopped the box I was carrying down on the coffee table, then went into the kitchen to make some coffee.

I came back out with my oversized Edgar Allan Poe mug filled with coffee and lots of cream. Allison and Lucy had made Max move

to the love seat with Chase so they could sit together on the couch and save me a spot between them.

I sat down and took my first sip of coffee. Feeling instantly better I asked, “Aren't you all sick of me yet?”

“Don't be silly Xoe,” Max answered. “You're our wise and omnipotent benefactor.”

I threw a pillow at him, almost spilling my coffee in the process. I had a feeling I'd be hearing jokes about me being their new leader for quite some time.

The front door opened again to reveal Jason, freshly scrubbed and dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans. I liked the flannel way better than the dress clothes.

Before he could walk in, a fire erupted momentarily behind him, quickly extinguishing to reveal my dad. Jason was unfazed by my dad's abrupt appearance. He simply walked inside then held the door for him.

My dad looked unusually disheveled. He was normally the picture of good hygiene, but now his gray dress shirt was missing a few buttons and had one sleeve torn off, and his face and clothing were covered either in ash or dirt.

“This Bartimus problem might be a bigger deal than I originally thought,” he announced.

Did I mention that a demon's life is never easy?

~

I hope you enjoyed the first three books in the Xoe Meyers Series! Book four can be found here:

DEMON DOWN

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